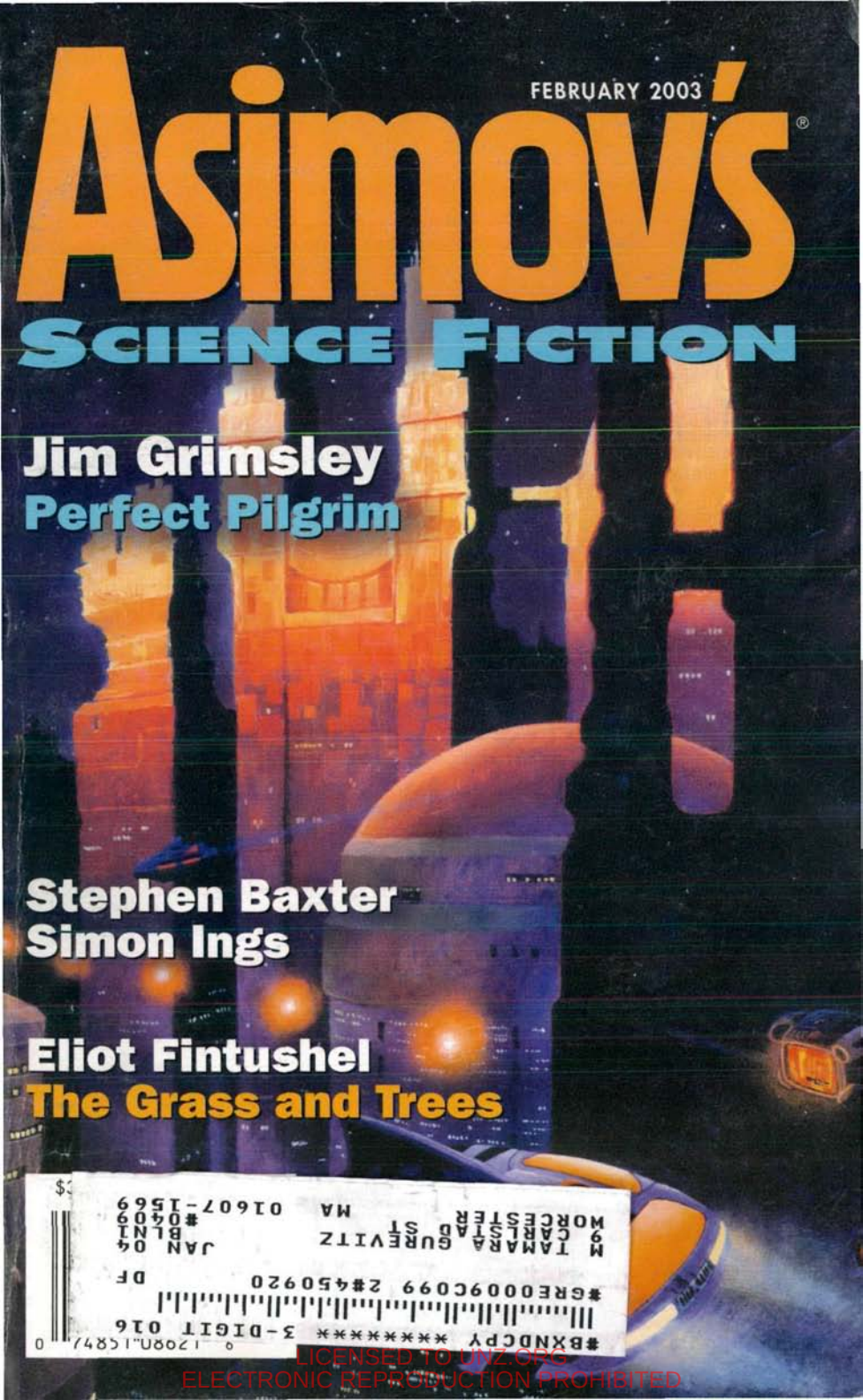

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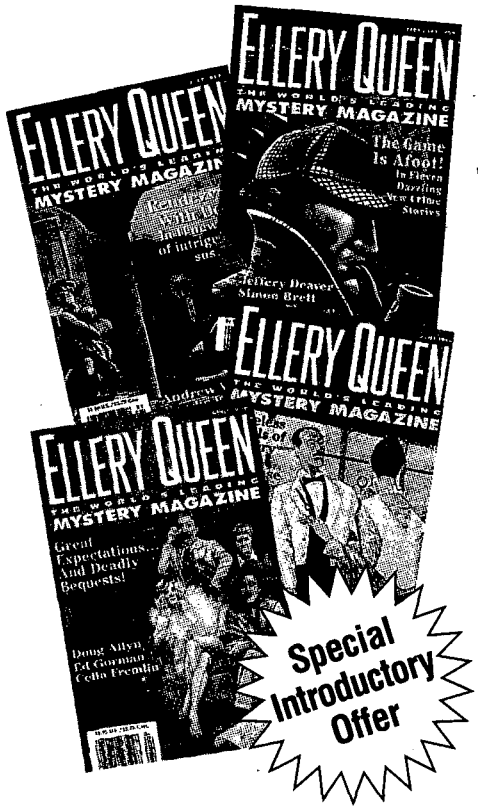

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REFLECTIONS

by Robert Silverberg

OLLA PODRIDA

Olla podrida—it's a Spanish phrase, meaning a stew that is made by tossing all sorts of culinary odds and ends into a pot, a chunk of chicken and a bit of lamb and some carrots and whatever else happens to be lying around the kitchen in need of getting used up. I've never encountered *olla podrida* on a restaurant menu, but the term does get employed now and then by columnists who find themselves accumulating a miscellany of interesting items that are too short to provide fodder for an entire column but too good to be thrown away. I have quite an accumulation of such items on my desk myself; and it struck me this morning that stewing up a little *olla podrida* of my own would be one good way of disposing of that evergrowing mound of clippings, while at the same time providing my readers with those little insights into our increasingly futuristic world that this column seeks to offer.

For example—

Since I've used a bit of Spanish as my opening hook here, let's proceed to a clipping I've had around for a couple of years on the way in which the language of Borges, Cervantes, and García Lorca is adapting to the coming of the Internet. It's another case of the creeping Anglicization of the cosmos.

Throughout the Hispanophone world, from Madrid and Seville to Mexico City and Buenos Aires, there is a developing tendency for computer users to employ simple Hispanified versions of American computer jargon in place of traditional Spanish words. "Mouse," in the Spanish that Borges would have used, is *raton*. In Internet Spanish, though, it's *el maus*. "Backup?" *El backup*. "To delete," which would be *borrar*, "to blot out," in Cervantes' language, is a blunt and geeky *deletear* in the twenty-first century's wired version of *Español*. The same process gives us *taipear* for "to type," instead of *escriber a maquina*, and *forwardear* instead of *reenviar* for "to forward a file."

When making a file, of course, one must not forget to make *el backup*. When tacking on an attachment, one does not add *el archivo adjunto* but, rather, *el atachment*. And to use that maus when visiting *el site* (not *el sitio*, as the purists of the Academia Mexicana and other guardians of the Spanish language would prefer) it is necessary to make a "click," which is not *hacer golpecito*, as in clicking the tongue, but a simple and brutal *hacer click*. And so it goes—the evolution of what the linguistic scholars are beginning to call Cyber-Spanglish. Borges, that keen and detached student of evolving cultural trends, might have been amused by it, and perhaps even the ribald Señor Cervantes, but not, I think, a sensitive poet like García Lorca.

Meanwhile, back on geekery's native turf in California, I have here a report on what was the lat-

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est computer slang in the summer of 2000. How much of this is still current, I wonder, among those of you who will be seeing these words in far-off futuristic 2003? I await instruction from readers who are closer to the cutting edge of linguistic evolution than I am.

Domainist: a snob who looks down scornfully on people whose e-mail addresses have the "wrong" domain—aol.com, say, or msn.net, or one of the various free internet services, or whatever else it is that the domainist disapproves of.

PANS: acronym for "pretty amazing new stuff."

kevork: to cancel or delete; derived from the name of Dr. Jack Kevork-ian, the assisted-suicide activist.

granular: to pay attention to the fine details, as in "It's time we got granular on this project."

kubris: the particular form of arrogance practiced by multimedia auteurs who have delusions of being Stanley Kubrick.

WOMBAT: acronym for "waste of money, brains and time."

Does anyone still use any of those, or have they already become antiquated entries in yesterday's cyberdictionary?

And then, as long as the name of Stanley Kubrick has entered this column:

From Toyota, in the autumn of 2001, came an announcement of a cute little high-tech vehicle called the Toyota POD, developed jointly with Sony. I haven't heard anything about it since its launching at the 2001 Tokyo Auto Show, but perhaps I haven't been looking in the right places and by now it may be almost ready to be put on the market.

The POD is meant to be a very cute buggy, a car with a built-in personality. It has LED "eyebrow" lights, headlight "eyelids," and something called "mood lamps," which allow it to put on a happy face as its owner approaches it, or to glower angrily when its driver feels one of those road-rage moments coming on. If the passengers—it has room for four of them, who can swivel their seats to face each other—are having a particularly amiable conversation, the POD is supposedly able to sense the good vibes within and will automatically take pictures of the jolly moment, since, as you know, the Japanese are great ones for snapping photos of each other all the livelong day.

For that extra little Kubrick/Clarke *2001* touch, your POD does without an ignition key and provides its owner with a Mini Pod controller. This, so far as I can tell from the blurry picture accompanying the Toyota promotional materials, is a palm-sized remote-control gizmo that will let you in (and, one hopes, out) of the POD, turn its engine on and off, and even provide you with music keyed to pre-set driver preferences.

We have Orwellian touches as well as Kubrickian ones: there's a built-in driver-education function that compares your driving technique with that of pre-recorded expert drivers, and gives you little warnings via a built-in viewscreen if you don't measure up. Since the POD is also monitoring your acceleration/braking patterns, your pulse rate, and even your perspiration, it will attempt to calm you in moments of overaggressive driving by playing soothing music for you—oh, yes, give me Handel's

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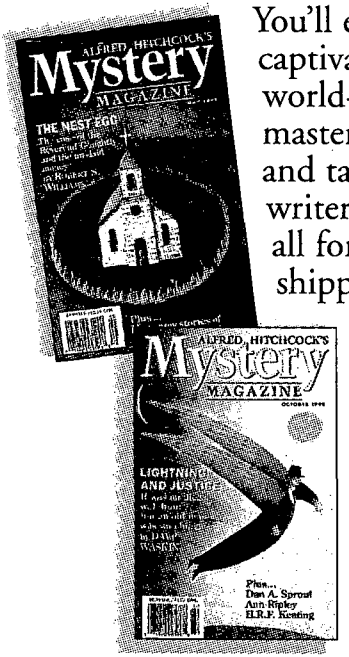

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Largo as I roar down the freeway at thirty miles above the limit—as well as displaying warnings on the screen. Don't you love it?

The press release doesn't indicate when the POD goes on sale. I have not put myself on the waiting list.

And—finally—a little cooking news from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology's Media Laboratory:

"Computers now don't have much to do with life," said Michael Hawley, assistant professor of media technology at MIT. "What if a food processor had a real processor in it? What if PostScript were for pasta?"

PostScript, for the benefit of those of you who know as little about the more rarefied regions of modern software as I do, is a program that allows a computer to draw pictures. The MIT Media Lab has used PostScript to program a laser cutting machine so that it can engrave a portrait of Martha Stewart on an eggplant, something that the culinary world was long looking for. The laser cutter, which is a device about the size of a photocopier that carves plastic and other hard materials, also is capable of printing words on cookies and crackers. Professor Hawley thinks that this might help children to learn how to read. ("Read your cookies, class, before you swallow them!") I can imagine what sorts of words the kids will put on the cookies themselves, if they ever get their hands on that laser cutter.

Then we have digital chocolate-chip cookies. A computerized counter walks you through the recipe, telling you how to mix the ingredients of the dough, how much milk to mix with the chocolate, and so forth. Takes me back to my own baking experiments, circa age seven, which were such wild successes that I decided to leave all activities of that sort to girls. It was plain that evolution had designed them and not me for such things.

Toys, too, are undergoing the MIT Media Lab treatment. Rosalind Picard, associate professor of media arts and sciences, is trying to design toys that are capable of sensing human emotions. A toy that can measure how hard or how often it is bounced would be able to "tell if it's being bounced happily or being abused"—and then, I suppose, would warn its bouncer in sepulchral tones that he or she had better shape up and do it right. You don't want your toys to be unhappy, do you, kiddo?

This technique, Professor Picard points out, might be extended to the very computers on which people like me write pieces like this. A camera in the computer would observe the facial expressions of its user, and a sensor would tell how hard the keyboard is being struck. The computer then would provide soothing empathic consolation to a tensely grimacing writer or one who is furiously pounding those keys. ("This is Hal speaking, Dave. There's absolutely nothing to worry about. You'll finish it in plenty of time for the deadline. Oh, and you might think of changing that last comma to a semi-colon. It's really the best way to connect those phrases, you know.")

O brave new world! ○

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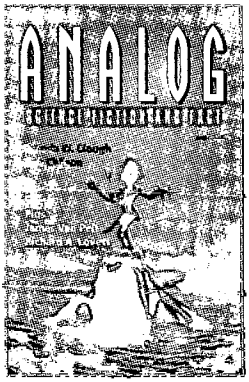

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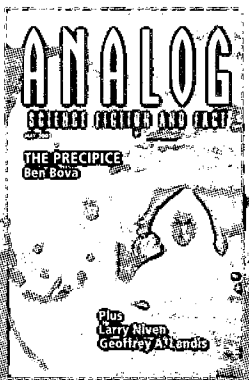

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BREEDING GROUND

Stephen Baxter

Stephen Baxter's most recent novel, *Evolution*, a saga of human origins, is just out from Del Rey. He's now at work on a new trilogy, tentatively called "Homo Superior" and, like "Breeding Ground," set in the Xeelee Universe. Mr. Baxter is also working on two more collaborations with Arthur C. Clarke.

Blue light burst from her starbreaker pod. Mari threw up her hands. The pod exploded in her face.

She was hurled backward, landing with a jarring impact against the weapons emplacement's rear bulkhead. Something gushed over her eyes—something sticky—blood? With a sudden terror, she scraped at her face.

The emplacement's calm order had been destroyed in an instant, she saw. Alarms howled, insistent. There was screaming all around her, people flailing. The transparent forward bulkhead had buckled inward, and the row of starbreaker pods behind it, including her own, had been crushed and broken open. Charred shadows still clung to some of the stations, and there was a stink of smoke, of burned meat. She had been lucky to have been thrown back, she realized dully.

But beyond the forward bulkhead, the battle was continuing. She saw black extragalactic space laced by cherry-red starbreaker beams, a calm enfilade caging in the bogey, the Snowflake, the misty alien artifact at the center of this assault. The rest of the flotilla hovered like clouds around the action: Spline ships, fleshy scarred spheres, sisters of the living ship in which she rode, each wielding a huge shield of perfectly reflective Ghost hide.

The gravity failed. She drifted away from the wall, stomach lurching. In the misty dark, something collided with her, soft and wet; she flinched.

There was a face in front of her, a bloody mouth screaming through the clamor of the alarm. "Gunner!"

Something snapped back into focus. "Yes, sir."

This was Jarn, a sub-lieutenant. She was bloodied, scorched, one arm dangling; she was struggling to pull herself into a pressure cloak. "Get yourself a cloak, then help the others. We have to get out of here."

Mari felt fear coil beneath her shock. She had spent the entire trip in-

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side this emplacement; here she had bunked, messed, lived; here was her primary function, the operation of a starbreaker beam. Get out? Where to?

". . . Academician Kapur first, then Mace. Then anybody else who's still moving . . ."

"Sir, the action—"

"—is over." For a heartbeat, Jarn's shrill voice softened. "Over for us, gunner. Now our duty is to keep ourselves alive. Ourselves, and the Academician, and the wetback. Is that clear?"

"Yes, sir."

"Move it!" Jarn spun away, hauling cloaks out of lockers.

Mari grabbed a cloak out of the smoke-filled air. Jarn was right; the first thing you had to do in a situation like this was to make sure you could keep functioning yourself. The semi-sentient material closed up around her, adjusting itself as best it could. The cloak was too small; it hurt as it tried to enfold her stocky shoulders, her muscular legs. Too late to change it now. There was a sharp tingle at her forehead as the cloak started to work on her wound.

Jarn had already opened a hatch at the back of the emplacement. She was pushing bodies through as fast as she could cram them in. Seeing Mari, she jabbed a finger toward Kapur.

The Academician—here because he was the nearest thing to an expert on the action's target—was drifting, limbs stiff, hands clutched in front of his face. Mari had to pull his hands away. His eye sockets were pits of ruin; the implanted Eyes there had burned out.

No time for that. She forced herself to close the cloak over his face. Then she pushed him by main force toward Jarn's open hatchway.

Next she came to Mace, the wetback. He was bent forward over a sensor post. When she pulled him back, she saw that both legs had been crudely severed, somewhere below the knee. Blood pumped out of broken vessels in sticky zero-G globules. His mouth gaped, strands of bloody drool floating around his face.

Her cloak had a medical kit at her waist. She ripped this open now and dug out a handful of gel. Shuddering at the touch of splintered bone and ragged flesh, she plastered the gel hastily over the raw wounds. The gel settled into place, turning pale blue as it sealed vessels, sterilized, dissolved its substance into a blood replacement, started the process of promoting whatever healing was possible. Then she dragged a cloak around Mace and hurled him bodily toward Jarn and the hatch.

Under the alarm, she realized now, the noise had subsided. No more screaming. Nobody left in the emplacement was moving, nobody but her.

Beyond the forward bulkhead, the bogey was beginning to glow internally, pink-white, and subtle structures crumbled. Fleshy Spline hulls drifted across the artifact's complex expanse, purposeful, determined.

But the bulkhead was blistering.

She dived through the hatch. Jarn slammed it closed. Mari felt a soundless explosion. The alarm was cut off at last.

She was in a kind of cave, roughly spherical, criss-crossed by struts of some cartilaginous material. It was dark here, a crimson obscurity relieved only by the glow of the cloaks. She could see portals in the walls of

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the cave—not hatchways like decent human engineering, but *orifices*, like nostrils or throats, leading to a network of darker chambers beyond. There was some kind of air here, surely unbreathable. Little motes moved in it, like dust.

When she touched a wall, it was warm, soft, moist. She recoiled.

She was stuck inside the body of a Spline.

Mari had never forgotten her first view of a Spline ship.

Its kilometers-wide bulk had dwarfed her flitter. It was a rough sphere, adorned by the tetrahedral sigil of free humanity. The hull, of a wrinkled, leathery hide, was punctured by vast navels within which sensors and weapons glittered. In one pit, an *eye* had rolled, fixing disconcertingly on Mari; she had found herself turning away from its stare.

The Spline—so went below-decks scuttlebutt—had once scoured the depths of some world-girdling ocean. Then, unknown years ago, they'd rebuilt themselves. They'd plated over their flesh, hardened their internal organs—and had risen from their ocean like vast, studded balloons.

What it boiled down to was that Spline ships were *alive*.

On the whole, it was best not to think about it. Cocooned in the metal and plastic of a gun or sensor emplacement, you mostly didn't have to. Now, however, Mari found herself immersed in deep red biological wetness, and her flesh crawled.

Jarn, strapping her damaged arm tightly to her side, watched her with disgust. "You're going to have to get used to it."

"I never wanted to be a wetback. Sir." The wetbacks were the officers and ratings who interfaced between the Spline vessel and its human cargo. Mace, the Navy officer who had been assigned to escort Academician Kapur during the action, was a wetback.

"We're all wetbacks now, gunner." She glanced around. "I'm senior here," she said loudly. "I'm in charge. Gunner, help me with these people."

Mari saw that Jarn was trying to organize the survivors into a rough row. She moved to help. But there was just a handful here, she saw—eight of them, including Mari and Jarn, just eight left out of the thirty who had been working in the emplacement at the time of the assault.

Here was Kapur, the spindly Academician with the ruined Eyes, sunk in sullen misery. Beside him, Mace drifted in the air, his cloak almost comically truncated over those missing legs. Jarn was working at Mace's waist, trying to dig out equipment from under the cloak's protective grip. Next to Mace were two squat forms, wrapped in misted cloaks, clutching at each other. Round faces peered up at Mari fearfully.

She reached for their names. "Tsedi. Kueht. Right?"

They nodded. They were supply ratings, both male, plump, soft-skinned. They spoke together. "Sir, what happened?" "When will we get out of here?"

Academician Kapur turned his sightless face. "We made a bonfire. A bonfire of wisdom almost as old as the universe. And we got our fingers burned."

The ratings quailed, clutching tighter.

Useless, Mari thought analytically. Dead weight. Rumor had it that

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they were cadre siblings, hatched in some vast inner-Expansion Conurbation; further rumor had it they were also lovers.

She moved on down the line of cloaked bodies. Two more survivors, roughly wrapped in their cloaks. She recognized Vael, a gunner ranked below herself, and Retto, a sub-lieutenant who had served as CO of the second watch. Retto had been officer of the watch at the time of the attack. Good sailors both, even the officer.

Except that they weren't survivors. She could see that even through the layers of their imperfectly fitting cloaks, which had turned a subtle blue color, the color of death. Mari's heart sank; it would have been good to have these two at her side.

She surveyed her surviving companions with disgust: Jarn, the pompous ass-muncher of a junior officer; Mace, the half-dead wetback; Kapur, the dried-up domehead; the two soft-bodied store-stackers. All that was left, when so many had died.

Jarn glanced up from her work. She had extracted a kit of what looked like hypodermic needles from Mace's waist. "Take their cloaks. Retto's and Vael's."

Jarn was one rank below the CO and his First Officer, with nominal responsibilities for communications. Mari knew her as a prissy idiot who routinely dumped any responsibility downward. And now, in this grim situation, she had issued a stupid order like that. "Sir, they're *dead.*"

Kapur turned blindly. A thin, intense, withdrawn man, he wore his head shaven after the ancient fashion of the Commission for Historical Truth, and he had a clutch of bright red vials strapped to his waist: mnemonic fluid, every droplet a backup record of everything that had happened during the action. He said, "I can tell what you're thinking, gunner. Why did such good soldiers have to die, when such a rabble as this has survived?"

"Academician, shut up," Jarn snapped. "Sir. Just *do* it, gunner. There's nothing to be done for them now. And we're going to need those cloaks." Fumbling one-handed, she began to jab needles into the fleshy wall of the little cavern, squirting in thick blue gunk.

Keeping her face stony, Mari peeled the cloaks off the inert bodies of Vael and Retto. Vael's chest had been laid open, as if by an immense punch; blood and bits of burned meat floated out of the cavity.

Jarn abandoned her needle-jabbing. "The Spline isn't responding." She held up the emptied hypodermics. "This is the way you communicate with a Spline—in an emergency, anyhow. Chemicals injected into its bloodstream. Lieutenant Mace could tell you better than I can. I think that this Spline must be too badly wounded. It has withdrawn from us, from human contact."

Mari gaped. "We can't control the ship?"

Kapur sighed. "The Spline do not *belong* to us, to humanity. They are living ships, independent, sentient creatures, who we hire."

The siblings huddled fearfully. The fatter one—Tsedi—stared with wide eyes at Jarn. "They'll come to get us. Won't they, sir?"

Jarn's face flickered; Mari saw that she was out of her depth herself, but she was working to keep control, to keep functioning. Maybe this

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screen-tapper was stronger than Mari had suspected. "I'm a communications officer, remember." That meant that she had a Squeem implant, an alien fish swimming in her belly, her link to the rest of the crew. She closed her eyes, as if tapping into the Squeem's crude group mind. "There is no *they*, rating."

Tsedi's eyes were wide. "They're dead? *All* of them?"

"We're on our own. Just focus on that."

Alone. Kapur laughed softly. Mari tried to hide her own inner chill.

As if on cue, they all felt a subtle, gut-wrenching displacement.

"Hyperdrive," Mari said.

The siblings clutched each other. "Hyperdrive? Where is it taking us?"

Kapur said, "Wherever it wants. We have no influence. Probably the Spline doesn't even know we are here. This is what you get when your warship has a mind of its own."

Impatiently, Jarn snapped, "Nothing we can do about *that*. All right, we have work to do. We should pool what we have. Med kit, supplies, weapons, tools, anything."

There was precious little. They had the cloaks, plus the two spares scavenged from the bodies of Vael and Retto. The cloaks came with medkits, half depleted already. There was some basic planet-fall survival gear, carried routinely by the crew: knives, water purification tablets, even lengths of line for fishing.

Jarn rubbed her wounded arm, gazing at the kit. "No food. No water." She glared at Kapur. "You. Academician. You know something about Spline?"

"More than the rest of you, I suspect," Kapur said dryly. "For all that you use them to fly you around the Expansion from one battle to another. But little enough."

"The cloaks will keep us alive for twenty-four hours. We might use the spares to stretch that a little longer. But we need to replenish them. How? Where do we go?"

I wouldn't have thought so far ahead, Mari thought. Again, she was reluctantly impressed by Jarn.

Kapur pressed his fists to his burned-out Eyes. "Inward. The Spline has storage chambers in a layer beneath its hull. I think."

Tsedi said, "If only Lieutenant Mace was conscious. He's the expert. He would *know*—"

"But he isn't," Jarn snapped, irritated. "There's just us."

They were silent.

"All right." Jarn looked around, and selected an orifice directly opposite the one they had entered through. "This way," she said firmly. "I'll lead. Academician, you follow me, then you two, Tsedi and Kueht. Gunner, bring up the rear. Here." She thrust one of the knives into Mari's hand. "Keep together."

Kapur asked, "What about Mace?"

Jarn said carefully, "We can't take him. He's lost a massive amount of blood, and I think he may be in anaphylactic shock."

"We take him."

"Sir, you're our priority." That was true, Mari knew. You were always supposed to preserve the Academicians and Commissaries first, for the

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sake of the knowledge they might bring forward to the next engagement. And if that couldn't be managed, then you retrieved the mnemonic vials the domeheads kept with themselves at all times. Everything else was expendable. Everything and everyone. Jarn said, "We don't have energy to spare for—"

"We take him." Kapur reached for Mace. Grunting, he pulled the Navy man to him and arranged him on his back, arms around his neck, head lolling, half-legs dangling.

Jarn exchanged a glance with Mari. She shrugged. "All right. You others, get ready."

"I don't like this situation, sir," Mari said, as she gathered up her kit.

"Me neither," Jarn muttered. "The sooner the Expansion takes full control of these Lethe-spawned Spline, the better. In the meantime, just do your job, sailor. Form up. Keep together. Let's go."

One by one, they filed through the orifice, into the crimson-black tunnel beyond. Mari, as ordered, took the rear of the little column, and she watched the dim yellow glow of the others' cloaks glistening from the organic walls.

She couldn't believe that this was happening. But she breathed, she moved, she followed orders; and she seemed to feel no fear. You're in shock, she told herself. It will come.

In the meantime, do your job.

Without gravity, there was no up, no down. Their only orientation came from the tunnel around them. Its clammy walls were close enough to touch in every direction, the space so cramped that they had to proceed in single file.

The tunnel twisted, this way and that, taking them sideways as much as inward. But with every meter, Mari was descending deeper into the carcass of this wounded Spline; she was very aware that she was crawling like some parasitic larva *under* the skin of a living creature.

What made it worse was the slow going.

Jarn and Mari moved okay, but Kapur blundered blindly, and Tsedi and Kueht seemed unaccustomed to the lack of gravity. The siblings stayed as close to each other as they could get in the confined space, touching and twittering like birds. Mari growled to herself, thinking what the master-at-arms would have said at that.

They couldn't have gone more than a few hundred meters before Mace's cloak turned blue. But Kapur, bathed in a cerulean glow he couldn't see, refused to leave Mace behind. He toiled doggedly on, his inert burden on his back.

Jarn snapped, "I don't have time for this. Gunner, sort it out."

"Sir. How?"

"With the tact and sensitivity you starbreaker grunts are famous for. Just do it. You two, move on." She took the lead again, hustling Tsedi and Kueht behind her.

Mari took her place behind Kapur, at a loss. ". . . I guess you knew each other a long time, sir."

Kapur turned. "Mace and I? How old are you, gunner?"

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"Eighteen standard, sir."

"Eighteen." He shook his head. "I first met Mace before you were born, then. I was seconded here by the Commission, on the failed first contact with the Snowflake."

"Seconded?"

"I was a policeman. As the Expansion grows, the rate of Assimilation itself accelerates, and specialists are rare. . . . My own brand of forensic intelligence proved functional for the job. My job was to understand the Snowflake. Mace's was to destroy it."

Mari understood the tension. For five thousand years, humanity's rivalry with those majestic rivals, the Galaxy-spanning Xeelee, had fueled the great colonizing push called the Third Expansion—and it had determined humanity's attitude to the multitudinous alien species it encountered. They called it the Assimilation, the processing of newly contacted alien species on an industrial scale, across a front that now spanned a quarter of the Galaxy's disc and had reached the great globular clusters beyond.

And there they had found the Snowflake.

Human ships had approached one of the oldest stars of all, a sphere of primordial matter hovering in the Galactic halo like a failed beacon. It was dead, choked with iron; carbon dusted its cooling surface.

The artifact humans called the Snowflake surrounded this dwarf, a vast setting for an ancient, faded jewel.

Since the construction of the Snowflake, thirteen billion years had shivered across the swirling face of the Galaxy. So far as anybody knew, the Snowflake had been constructed to observe: simply that, to gather data, as the universe slowly cooled.

Processing: contact, conquest, absorption—or destruction. If Kapur had been able to determine the goals of the Snowflake and its builders, then perhaps those objectives could be subverted to serve human purposes. If not, then the Snowflake had no value.

Mari guessed, "Lieutenant Mace gave you a hard time."

Kapur shook his head. "Mace was a good officer. Hard, intelligent, ambitious, brutal. He knew his job and he carried it out as best he could. I was in his way; that was uncomfortable for me. But I always admired him for what he was. In the end the Snowflake resisted Mace's crude assaults."

"How?"

"You don't survive for thirteen billion years without learning a few tricks, gunner. We were—brushed aside. It has taken twenty-two years for the Academies to figure out how to deal with the Snowflake. For deal with it we must, of course. Its stubborn, defiant existence is not a direct threat to us, but it is a challenge to the logic of our ideology." Now he smiled. "We corresponded. I followed Mace's career with a certain pride. Do you think it's getting hot?"

"Sir—"

"When I was assigned to this assault, Mace was seconded to accompany me. He had risen to lieutenant. It galled him to have to become a wetback."

"Sir. Lieutenant Mace is dead."

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Kapur drifted to a halt, and sighed. "Perhaps knowing me did him some good too."

Gently, Mari pulled the broken body from Kapur's back. Kapur didn't resist; he drifted to the wall, running his fingers over its moist surface. Mari pulled the cloak off Mace's inert body, but it had been used up by its efforts to keep Mace alive.

She was surprised to learn of a friendship between a straight-and-true Navy man and a domehead. And then Kapur had attempted to haul his friend along with him, even though it must have been obvious that Mace couldn't survive—even though Kapur, as their passenger Academician, would have been within his rights to demand that the rest of them carry *him* along.

People always surprised you. Especially those without military training and the proper orientation. But then, she had never gotten to know any domeheads before, not before this disaster, today.

She shoved the body back the way they had come, up into the darkness. When she was done, she was sweating. Maybe it *was* getting hotter in here, as they penetrated deeper into the core of the Spline. "It's done, sir. Now we have to—"

There was a flash of light from deeper inside the tunnel. And now came a high-pitched, animal scream.

Mari shoved Kapur out of the way and hurled herself down the tunnel.

It was Tsedi, one of the fat ratings. He looked as if he had been shot in the stomach. The cloak over his fat belly was scorched and blackened, flaking away. Kueht bounced around the cramped tunnel, screaming, eyes bugging wide, flapping uselessly.

Jarn was struggling with one of the spare cloaks. "Help me." Together Jarn and Mari wrapped the cloak around Tsedi's shivering form.

And when she got closer Mari saw that whatever had burned through the rating's cloak had gone on, digging a hole right *into* Tsedi's body, exposing layers of flesh and fat. Inside the hole, something glistened, wet and pulsing—

She retched.

"Hold it in," Jarn said, her own voice tremulous. "Your cloak would handle the mess, but you'd smell it forever."

Mari swallowed hard, and got herself under control. But her hand went to the knife tucked into her belt. "Did someone fire on us?"

Jarn said, "Nothing like that. It was the Spline."

"The Spline?"

Kapur was hovering above them, anchored to the wall by a fingertip touch. "Haven't you noticed how hot it has become?"

Jarn said evenly, "I remember hearing rumors about this. It's part of their—umm, lifecycle. The Spline will dive into the surface layers of a star. Normally, of course, they drop off any human passengers first."

Mari said, "We're inside a *star*? Why?"

Jarn shrugged. "To gather energy. To feed—to refuel. Whatever. How should I know?"

"And to cleanse," Kapur murmured. "Probably our Spline's damaged

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outer layers have already been sloughed away, taking what was left of our emplacements with it."

"What about our dead?"

Kapur shrugged sightlessly.

"There was a sunbeam," Jarn said. "Focused somehow."

"An energy trap."

"Probably. Caught this poor kid in the gut. And—oh, Lethe!"

Tsedi convulsed, blood-flecked foam showing at his mouth, limbs flapping, belly pulsing wetly. Jarn and Mari tried to pin him down, but his flailing body was filled with unreasonable strength.

It finished as quickly as it had started. With a final spasm, he went limp.

Kueht began to scream, high-pitched.

Jarn sat back, breathing hard. "All right. All right. Take the cloak off him, gunner."

"We can't stay here," Kapur said gently. "Not while the Spline bathes in its star."

"No," Jarn said. "Deeper, then. Come on."

But Kueht clung to Tsedi's corpse. Jarn tried to be patient; in the gathering heat she drifted beside the rating, letting him jabber. "We grew up together," he was saying. "We looked after each other in the Conurbation, in the cadres. I was stronger than he was and I'd help him in fights. But he was clever. He helped me study. He made me laugh. I remember. . . ."

Mari listened to this distantly.

Kapur murmured, "You don't approve of family, gunner?"

"There is no such thing as family."

"You grew up in a Conurbation?"

"Navy-run," she growled. "Our cadres were broken up and reformed every few years, as per Commission rules. The way it should be. Not like *this*."

Kapur nodded. "But further from the center, the rules don't always hold so well. It is a big Expansion, gunner, and its edges grow diffuse. . . . And humanity will assert itself. What's the harm in family?"

"What good is it doing that rating now? It's only hurting him. Tsedi is *dead*."

"You despise such weakness?"

"*They* lived while good human beings died."

"Good human beings? Your comrades in arms. *Your* family."

"No—"

"Do you miss them, gunner?"

"I miss my weapon." Her starbreaker. It was true. It was what she was trained for, not this sticky paddling in the dark. Without her starbreaker, she felt lost, bereft.

In the end, Jarn physically dragged Kueht away from the stiffening corpse of his cadre sibling. At last, to Mari's intense relief, they moved on.

They seemed to travel through the twisting tunnel-tube for hours. As the semi-sentient cloaks sought to concentrate their dwindling energies

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on keeping their inhabitants alive, their glow began to dim, and the closing darkness made the tunnel seem even more confining.

At last, they came to a place where the tunnel opened out. Beyond was a chamber whose mottled walls rose out of sight, into the darkness beyond the reach of their cloaks' dim glow. Jarn connected a line to a hook that she dug into the Spline's fleshy wall, and she and Mari drifted into the open space.

Huge fleshy shapes ranged around them. Some of them pulsed. Fat veins, or perhaps nerve trunks, ran from one rounded form to another. Even the walls were veined: they were sheets of living tissue and muscle, nourished by the Spline's analogue of blood.

Mari found herself whispering. "Is it the brain?"

Jarn snorted. "Spline don't have brains as we do, tar. Even I know that much. Spline systems are—distributed. It makes them more robust, I guess."

"Then what *is* this place?"

Jarn sighed. "There's a lot about the Spline we don't understand." She waved a hand. "This may be a, a factory. An organic factory."

"Making *what?*"

"Who knows?" Kapur murmured. He lingered by the wall, sightless gaze shifting. "We are not the only clients of the Spline. They provide services for other species, perhaps from far beyond the Expansion, creatures of whom we may have no knowledge at all. But not everybody uses the Spline as warships. That much is clear."

"It is hardly satisfactory," Jarn said through clenched teeth, "that we have so little control over a key element of the Expansion's strategy."

"You're right, lieutenant," Kapur said. "The logic of the Third Expansion is based on the ultimate supremacy of mankind. How then can we *share* our key resources, like these Spline? But how could we control them?—any more than we can control this rogue in whose chest cavity we ride helplessly."

Mari said, "Lieutenant."

Jarn turned to her.

Mari glanced back at Kueht. The rating huddled alone at the mouth of the tunnel from which they had emerged. She made herself say it. "We could make faster progress."

Before Jarn could respond, Kapur nodded. "If we dump the weak. But we are not strangers any more; we have already been through a great deal together. Mari, will *you* be the one to abandon Kueht? And where will you do it? Here? A little further along?"

Mari, confused, couldn't meet Kapur's sightless glare.

Jarn angrily set herself before Kapur, clutching her wounded arm. "You're being unfair, Academician. She's trained to think this way. She's doing her job. Trying to save *your* life."

"Oh, I understand that, lieutenant. She is the result of ten thousand years of methodical warmaking, an art at which we humans have become rather good. She is polished precision machinery, an adjunct to the weapon she wielded so well. But in *this* situation, we are all stranded outside our normal parameters. Aren't we, gunner?"

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"This isn't getting us anywhere," Jarn snapped. She picked out a patch of deeper darkness on the far side of the chamber. "That way. The way we were heading. There must be an exit. We'll have to work our way around the walls. Mari, you help Kapur. Kueht, you're with me. . . ."

More long hours.

As its energy faded, Mari's cloak grew still more uncomfortable—tighter on her muscular body, chafing at armpits and groin and neck. It was actually tiring for her to struggle against its elasticity. And, though she had been able to resist throwing up, the cloak was eventually full of her own sour stink.

Meanwhile, her back ached where she had been rammed against the emplacement bulkhead. That gash on her head, half-treated by the cloak, was a permanent, nagging pain. Mysterious aches spread through her limbs and neck. Not only that, she was *hungry,* and as thirsty as she had ever been; she hadn't had so much as a mouthful of water since the assault itself.

She tried not to think about how much Kueht was slowing them down, what had transpired in the "factory." But there wasn't much else to think about.

She knew the syndrome. She was being given too much time in her own head. And the wrong kind of thinking was always a bad thing.

They came at last to another chamber.

As far as they could see in their cloaks' failing light, this was a hangar-like place of alcoves and nooks. The bays were separated by huge diaphanous sheets of some muscle-like material, marbled with fat. And within the alcoves were suspended great pregnant sacs of what looked like water: green, cloudy water.

Jarn made straight for one of the sacs, pulled out her knife and slit it open. The liquid pulsed out in a zero-G straight-line jet, bubbling slightly. Jarn thrust a finger into the flow, and read a sensor embedded in her cloaked wrist. She grinned. "Sea water. Earth-like, salty sea water. And this green glop is blue-green algae, I think. We found what we came for." She lengthened the slit. "Each of you pick a sac. Just immerse; the cloaks will take what they need." She showed them how to work nipples in their cloaks that would provide them with desalinated water, even a mushy food based on the algae.

Mari helped Kapur, then clambered inside a sac of her own. She didn't lose much water; surface tension kept it contained in big floating globules that she was able to gather up in her hands. She folded the sac like a blanket, holding it closed over her chest. The water was warm, and her cloak, drinking in nutrients, began to glow more brightly.

"Blue-green algae," she murmured. "From a human world."

"Obviously," Kapur said.

"Maybe this is one of the ways you *pay* a Spline," Jarn said. "I always wondered about that." She moved around the chamber, handing out vials of an amber fluid. "I think we deserve this. Pass it through your cloak."

Kapur asked, "What is it?"

Mari grinned. "Puhl's Blood." For *My-Khal Puhl,* the legendary pre-Extirpation explorer of Earth.

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"Call it a stimulant," Jarn said dryly. "An old Navy tradition, sir."

Mari sucked down her tot. "How long should we stay here?"

"As long as the cloaks need," Jarn said. "Try to sleep."

That seemed impossible. But the rocking motion of the water and its swaddling warmth seemed to soothe the tension out of her sore muscles. Mari closed her eyes, just for a moment. She thought about her star-breaker station: the smooth feel of the machinery as she disassembled it for servicing, the sense of its clean power when she worked it.

When she opened her eyes, three hours had passed. And Kueht had gone.

"He must have gone back," Jarn said. "Back to where we left his sibling."

"That was hours back," Mari said. She looked from one to the other. "We can't leave him." Without waiting for Jarn's reaction, she plunged back into the tunnel they had come from.

Jarn hurried after Mari, calling her back. But Mari wasn't about to listen. After a time, Jarn seemed to give up trying to stop her.

Through the factory-like chamber they went, then back along the twisting length of muscle-walled tunnel.

. . . Why am I doing this?

Kueht was still fat, useless, and weak; before the disaster, Mari wouldn't have made room for him in the corridor. All her training and drill, and the Expansion's Druz Doctrine that underpinned them, taught that people were not of equal worth. It was an individual's value to the species as a whole that counted: nothing more, nothing less. And it was the duty of the weak to lay down their lives for the strong, or the valuable.

But it wasn't working out like that. When it came down to it, Mari just couldn't abandon even a helpless, useless creature like Kueht; she couldn't be the one to leave him behind, just as Kapur had said. *Humanity will assert itself. . . .*

You're still thinking too much, gunner.

At last, they reached the place where Mari had jammed Tsedi's burned body. Kueht was here, sprawled over his sibling. They pulled at Kueht's shoulders, turning him on his back. His cloak flapped open. His face was swollen, his tongue protruding and blackened.

Mari said, "Kapur talked about opening our cloaks. Maybe that gave him the idea."

"It must have been hard," Jarn said. "The cloak would have resisted being opened; it is smart enough to know that it would kill its occupant if it did. And asphyxiation is a bad way to die." She shrugged. "He told us he didn't want to go on without Tsedi. I guess we just didn't believe it."

Mari shook her head, unfamiliar emotions churning inside her. Here were two comical little fat men, products of some flawed cadre somewhere, helpless and friendless save for each other. And yet Kueht had been prepared to die rather than live without the other. "*Why*?"

Jarn put her hand on Mari's arm; it was small over Mari's bunched bicep.

They paused to strip Kueht of his cloak. Even now, Mari realized, Jarn was thinking ahead, planning the onward journey.

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They made good speed back the way they had come, back to where Kapur was waiting. That was because they had lost the weak and slow after all, Mari reflected. It wasn't a thought that gave her any pleasure.

"We could just stay here," Jarn said. "There is food. We could last a long while."

Jarn seemed to have withdrawn into herself since the loss of Kueht. Maybe exhaustion was bringing out her core character. She was, after all, just a screen-tapper.

"You've done well," Mari said impulsively.

Jarn looked at her, startled.

"No," Kapur said. "We have to plan for the possibility of rescue. Anything else is futile, simply waiting to die."

Jarn said, "We're stuck inside a Spline warship, remember. Epidermis like armor."

Kapur nodded. "Then we must go to a place where the epidermis can be penetrated."

"Where?"

"The eyes. That's the only possibility I can think of."

Jarn frowned. "How will we find our way to an eye?"

"A nerve trunk," said Mari. Jarn looked at her. Mari said defensively, "Why not? Sir. Every eye must have an optic nerve connecting it to the rest of the nervous system. Or something like it."

Kapur laughed out loud.

Jarn shook her head. "You keep springing surprises on me, Mari."

They filled up the spare cloaks with sea water. Then, each of them trailing a massive, sluggish balloon by a length of rope, they formed up—Jarn leading, Kapur central, Mari bringing up the rear.

As they left the chamber, mouth-like nozzles puckered from the walls and began to spew sprays of colorless liquid. Mari's cloak flashed a warning. Stomach acid, she thought. She turned away.

Once they were in motion, the inertia of her water bag gave Mari little trouble, but when the tunnel curved, she had some work to do hauling the bag around corners and giving it fresh momentum. But she worked with a will. Physical activity: better than thinking.

In some places, the tunnels were scarred: once damaged, now healed. Mari remembered more scuttlebutt. Some of the great Spline vessels were very old, perhaps more than a million years old, according to the domeheads. And they were veterans of ancient wars, fought, won, and lost long before humans had even existed.

They had been moving barely half an hour when they came to another chamber.

This one was something like the "factory." A broad open chamber crisscrossed by struts of cartilage was dominated by a single pillar, maybe a meter wide, that spanned the room. It was made of something like translucent red-purple skin, and Mari made out fluid moving within it: blood, perhaps, or water. And there were sparks, sparks that flew like birds.

Kapur sniffed loudly. "Can you smell that?" Their cloaks transmitted selective scents. "Ozone. An electric smell."

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Jarn's water bag, clumsily sealed, was leaking; Mari had been running into droplets all the way up the tunnel. But now she saw that the droplets were *falling*—drifting away from Jarn, following slowly curving orbits, falling in toward the pillar that dominated the center of the room.

Jarn, fascinated, followed the droplets toward the pillar.

Something passed through Mari's body, a kind of clench. She grunted and folded over.

"*Oh,*" said Kapur. "That was a tide. Lethe—"

Without warning, he hurled himself forward. He collided clumsily with Jarn, scrabbled to grab her, and spun her around. His momentum was carrying the two of them toward the pillar. But he tried to shove her away.

"No, you don't, sir," Jarn grunted. With a simple one-armed throw, she flipped him back toward Mari. But that left her drifting still faster toward the pillar.

Kapur scrabbled in the air. "You don't understand."

"Hold him, gunner." Behind Jarn, Mari saw, those water droplets had entered tight, whirling orbits, miniature planets around a cylindrical sun. Jarn said, "We haven't brought him all this way to—"

And then she folded.

As simple as that, as if crumpled by an invisible fist. Her limbs were thrust forward, her spine and neck bent over until they cracked. Blood and other fluids, deep purple, flooded her cloak, until that broke in turn, and a gout of blood and shit sprayed out.

Mari grabbed Kapur's bent form and threw her body across his, sheltering him from the flood of bodily fluids.

Kapur was weeping, inside his cloak. "I heard it. I *heard* what happened to her."

"What—?"

"This is the hyperdrive chamber. Don't you see? Inside a Spline, even a star drive grows organically. Oh, you are seeing miracles today, gunner. Miracles of the possibilities of life!"

"We have to get you out of here."

He straightened, seeming to get himself under control. "No. The lieutenant—"

Mari shrieked into his face, "She's dead!" He recoiled as if struck. She forced herself to speak calmly. "She's dead, and we have to leave her, as we left the rest. I'm in charge now. Sir."

"The Squeem," he said evenly.

"What?"

"Jarn's implant. If we're to have any chance of rescue, we need it. . . . Once the Squeem conquered the Earth itself. Did you know that? Now they survive only as unwilling symbiotes of mankind. . . ."

Mari glanced back at Jarn's body, which was drifting away from the pillar. She seemed to have been compressed around a point somewhere above her stomach. Her center of gravity, perhaps. "I can't."

"You have to. I'll help." Kapur's voice was hard. "Take your knife."

They traveled on for perhaps a day.

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Mari's cloak began to fail, growing cloudy, stiff, confining. Kapur moved increasingly slowly and feebly, and, though he didn't complain or even ask, he needed a lot of help. It seemed that he had been wounded somehow, maybe internally, by the shock that had killed Jarn. But there wasn't anything Mari could do about that.

Once, the tunnel they were using suddenly flooded with a thick gloopy liquid, crimson flecked with black. Blood maybe. Mari had to anchor them both to the wall; she wrapped her arms around Kapur and just held him there, immersed in a roaring, blood-dark river, until it passed.

At last, they found an eye.

It turned out to be just that: an *eye*, a fleshy sphere some meters across. It swiveled, this way and that, rolling massively. At the back was a kind of curtain of narrow, overlapping sheets—perhaps components of a retina—from which narrower vine-like fibers led to the nerve bundle they had followed. Mari parted the fibers easily. A clear fluid leaked into the general murk.

She pulled Kapur into the interior of the eye. It was a neat spherical chamber. She lodged Kapur against the wall. She found places to anchor their bundles of water, and the scrap of cloak within which swam the Squeem, the tiny alien not-fish that had inhabited Jarn's stomach.

Unlike the tunnels and chambers they had passed through, there were no shadows here, no lurking organic shapes; it was almost cozy.

She pushed at the forward wall. Her hand sank into a soft, giving, translucent surface. A lens, maybe. But beyond there was only veined flesh. "If this is an eye, why can't I see out?"

"Perhaps the Spline has closed its eyes."

The floor under Mari seemed to shudder; the clear fluid pulsed, slow waves crossing the chamber, as the eye swiveled. "But the eye is moving."

Kapur grinned weakly. "Surely Spline dream."

Then the Spline eyelid opened, like a curtain raising. And, through a dense, distorting lens, Mari saw comet light.

They were deep within a solar system, she saw. She could tell because the comet had been made bright by sunlight. Its dark head was obscured by a glowing cloud, and two shining tails streaked across the black sky, tails of gas and dust.

To Mari, it was a strange, beautiful sight. In most Expansion systems, such a comet wouldn't be allowed to come sailing so close to a sun, because of the danger to the inhabitants of the system, and of the comet itself—all that outgassing would make the nucleus a dangerous place to live.

But she saw no signs of habitation. "I don't get it," she said. "I don't see any lights. Where are the people? . . . Oh."

Kapur turned when he heard her gasp.

Ships came sailing out of the glare of the comet's diffuse coma: great fleshy ships, Spline ships, a dozen of them, more. She peered, seeking the green sigil of humanity, the telltale glitter of emplacements of weapons and sensors; but she saw nothing but walls of hardened flesh, the watery glint of eyes. This flotilla was moving like none she had seen before—co-

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ordinated, yes, but with an eerie, fluid grace, like a vast dance. Some of the Spline were smaller than the rest, darting little moons that orbited the great planets of the others.

And now they were gathering around the comet core.

"They are grazing," she said. "The Spline are grazing on the comet."

Kapur smiled, but his face was grey. "This is not a flotilla. It is a—what is the word—it is a *school.*"

"They are wild Spline."

"No. They are simply Spline."

Now the school broke and came clustering around Mari's ship. Huge forms sailed across her vision like clouds. She saw that the smaller ones—infants?—were nudging almost playfully against her Spline's battered epidermis. It was a collision of giants—even the smallest of these immature creatures must have been a hundred meters across.

And now the Spline rolled. Her view was swiveled away from the comet, across a sky littered with stars, and toward a planet.

It was blue: the blue of ocean, of water, the color of Earth. But this was not a human world. It was swathed in ocean, a sea broken only by a scattered litter of gleaming ice floes at the poles, and a few worn, rusty islands. She could see features on the shallow ocean floor: great craters, even one glowing pit, the marks of volcanism. An out-of-view sun cast glittering highlights from that ocean's silvery, wrinkled hide, and a set of vast waves, huge to be visible from this altitude, marched endlessly around the water-world.

And now she saw a fleet of grey-white forms that cut through the ocean's towering waves, leaving wakes like an armada of mighty ships, visible even from space.

"Of course," Kapur said, his voice a dry rustle, as she described this to him. "It must be like this."

"What?"

"The home world of the Spline. The breeding ground. We knew they came from an ocean. Now they swim through the lethal currents of space. But biology must not be denied; they must return here, to their original birthing place, to breed, to continue the species. Like sea turtles who crawl back to the land to lay their eggs." Kapur folded on himself, tucking his arms into his chest. "If only I had my Eyes! . . . I often wondered *how* the Spline made that transition from ocean to vacuum. As giant ocean-going swimmers, they surely lacked limbs, tools; there would be no need for the sort of manipulative intelligence that would enable them to redesign themselves. There must have been others involved—don't you think? Hunters, or farmers. For their own reasons, *they* rebuilt the Spline—and gave them the opportunity to rebel, to take control of their destiny."

"Academician," Mari said hesitantly. "I don't recognize the stars. I don't see any sign of people. I never heard of a world like this."

"Yes?"

"What part of the Expansion are we in?"

He sighed. "Nobody has seen the home world of the Spline before. Therefore we can't be in the Expansion. I'm afraid I have no idea where we are." He coughed, feebly, and she saw that he was sweating.

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It was getting hot.

She glanced out of the window-lens. That blue world had expanded so that it filled up her window, a wall of ocean. But the image was becoming misty, blurred by a pinkish glow. Plasma.

"I think we're entering the atmosphere."

"The Spline is going home."

Now the glow became a glaring white, flooding the chamber. The temperature was rising savagely, and the chamber walls began to shudder. She found herself pulled to the floor and pressed deep into yielding tissue.

I'm not going to live through this, she thought. It was the first time she had understood that, deep in her gut. And yet she felt no fear: only concern for Kapur. She cradled him in her arms, trying to shield him from the deceleration. His body felt stick-thin. He gasped, his face working from pain from which she couldn't save him. Nevertheless she tried to support his head. "There, there," she murmured.

"Do you have any more of that Puhl blood?"

"No. I'm sorry."

"Pity. . . ." He whimpered, and tried to raise his hands to his ruined Eyes.

He had never once complained of that injury, she realized now, even though the agony must have been continual and intense. There are different sorts of strength, she thought. She felt as if her head was full of boulders: huge thoughts, vast impressions that rattled within her skull, refusing her peace. "Lieutenant Jarn turned out to be a good officer. Didn't she, sir?"

"Yes, she did."

"I never liked her, before. But she sacrificed her life for you."

"That was her duty. You would have done the same."

"Yes," said Mari doggedly, "but *you* tried to save *her*. Even though you didn't have to. Even though you would have been killed yourself in the process."

He tried to turn his head. "Gunner, I sense that you believe that you have failed, because you aren't dead yet. Listen to me now. You haven't failed. In the end, what brought us so far was not your specialist training, but deeper human qualities of courage, initiative, endurance. Empathy. In the end, it will be those qualities that will win this war, not a better class of weapon. You should be proud of yourself."

She wasn't sure about that. "If I ever did get out of this I'd have to submit myself for re-orientation."

"The Commission would have its work cut out, I think—Ah." His face worked. "Child." She had to bend to hear him. He whispered, "Even now, my wretched mind won't stop throwing out unwelcome ideas. You still have a duty to perform. *Remember*."

"Remember?"

"You saw the stars. Given that, one could reconstruct the position of this world, this Spline home. And how valuable that piece of information would be! It would be the end of the free Spline," he said. "What . . . a pity. But I am afraid that we have a duty. Tell them what you saw."

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"Sir—"

He tried to grasp her arm, his ruined face swiveling. "*Tell* them." His back arched, and he gasped. "*Oh.*"

"No!" she said, shaking him.

"I am sorry, gunner Mari. So sorry." And he exhaled a great gurgling belch, and went limp.

She continued to cradle Academician Kapur, rocking him like a child, as the homecoming Spline plunged deeper into its world's thick atmosphere.

But as she held him, she took the vials of mnemonic fluid from his waist, and drank them one by one. And she took the Squeem from its cloak bag—it wriggled in her fingers, cold and very alien—and, overcoming her disgust, swallowed it down.

In the last moments, the Spline's great eyelid closed.

Accompanied by Lieutenant-Commander Erdac, Commissary Drith stepped gingerly through the transfer tunnel and into the damaged Spline eye. Drith's brow furrowed, sending a wave of delicate creases over her shaved scalp. It was bad enough to be immersed *inside* the body of a living creature like this, without being confronted by the gruesome sight the salvage teams had found here. Still, it had been a prize worth retrieving.

Erdac said, "You can see how the Squeem consumed this young gunner, from inside out. It kept alive that way, long enough anyhow for it to serve as a beacon to alert us when this Spline returned to service in human space. And there was enough of the mnemonic fluid left in the gunner's body to—"

"A drop is sufficient," Drith murmured. "I do understand the principle, Commander."

Erdac nodded stiffly, his face impassive.

"Quite a victory, Commander," Drith said. "If the breeding ground of the Spline can be blockaded, then the Spline can effectively be controlled."

"These two fulfilled their duty in the end."

"Yes, but we will profit personally from this discovery."

He looked down at the twisted bodies and poked at them with a polished toecap. "Look how they're wrapped around each other. Strange. You wouldn't expect a dry-as-a-stick Academician and a boneheaded Navy grunt to get so close."

"The human heart contains mysteries we have yet to fathom, Commander."

"Yeah. Even with the mnemonic, I guess we'll never really know what happened here."

"But we know enough. What else matters?" Drith turned. "Come, Commander. We both have reports to file, and then a mission to plan, far beyond the Expansion's current limits . . . quite an adventure!"

They left, talking, planning. The forensic teams moved in to remove the bodies. It wasn't easy. Even in death they were closely intertwined, as if one had been cradling the other. ○

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ELEPHANT

Simon Ings

Simon Ings is currently researching a book about eyesight, "in a heroic and possibly doomed attempt to put my intellectual money where my science fiction-writing mouth is." A multimedia serial, *The Smoke*, is in preparation; and, in the absence of any multi-million dollar deals, will be available on his homepage. He tells us his regular climbing partner has wisely moved to another country, so the author is getting rather fat. Mr. Ings is married, and lives and works in London.

"Wanna fly?"

It was the start of our third week in Rio de Janeiro. My wife Katja and I were sitting under a Brahma Cola parasol on Pepino Beach. We were sharing a fleshy green coconut, sucking up the milk through waxed paper straws, when that battered grey Volkswagen Gol pulled up by the side of the road, right behind us: "Hey! *Turistas!* You fly?"

We turned together and looked: Pedra Bonita stuck out through the fabric of the city like a tongue. Green-black foliage hid its cuts and valleys. Its sides were so steep and smooth, they might have sprung from a child's dream.

"Like a bird!"

Distance and the late hour mellowed and misted its heights. Around them, wheeling like manta rays in the green, undersea light, a dozen hang-gliders reflected the sun.

"You go," she said. "You."

There were about fifty people on the summit—the sort of wealthy jocks you find propping up the Jockey Club bar of an evening, swapping tales of derring-do over glasses of chopp escuro. I watched as they assembled their glider frames. The pieces they handled were sleek and light and weather-shaped, like driftwood.

Our Acer Duplo training glider was so old and heavy and angular, you could have made your own with scaffolding and tarp.

The boy helped me on with my harness. It was a hopeless cat's cradle, botched together out of seat-belt webbing. He left me to tighten the buckles round my thighs; I practically tourniqueted myself.

These were his instructions:

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"Don't stop," he said. "*Run.* Don't stop. Or—" He made an elegant swooping, spiraling gesture and grinned.

I was beginning to like him.

"Run!"

The boards thundered under our feet—and slipped smoothly away.

The updraft carried us high above the peak.

"Like a bird!" the boy cried. He seemed very relieved. "Like a bird!"

We twirled very slowly: a mobile hung from a faultless blue ceiling. To our left, Rocinha straggled and swelled ambitiously up the sides of its mountain: the most famous of Zona Sul's slums, its dirt streets and red brick towers evoked the first workings of Babel. To the right, I glimpsed our launch point—the platform seemed much steeper now, the lip of an infernal jug, spilling its rebel angels in ones and twos down the jungled sides of the Pedra Bonita. Below us, the pools of Rio's very rich blinked and flashed like polished stones.

"Like a bird!" the boy laughed, and, in imitation of some local breed, he whistled.

A key turned in my head.

A key turned. A door opened.

I gasped.

Golden rain fell past my eyes. A hail of needles stuffed my mouth, my nose, my eyes. Golden lances pierced me.

I trembled, blinked, and opened my eyes on—

Nothing.

At least, nothing out of the ordinary.

I hunted for signs of difference, for dislocation, but there were none. Villas, and kidney-shaped pools. In the distance, the Redentor — the gigantic embracing Christ of a thousand wish-you-were-here postcards. A private plane rose like a bubble of mercury, winding clear of the Açúcar. Breakers crashed on Pepino beach.

"Be still."

"Sorry."

And silence.

Then—because he had next to no English, and anyway, the bird-call was a more eloquent way of expressing his enjoyment—the boy began whistling again.

Painfully, in the lock buried deep in my skull, the key ground once more. I gritted my teeth, as tumbler after tumbler fell.

Again it came. Golden rain. It poured and poured.

I closed my eyes against the downpour. Golden rain lanced through my head.

The final tumbler toppled.

I did not cry out. I held on. I steeled myself.

We skidded a pocket of turbulence and the glider trembled. Fabric snapped loosely, like a bed sheet.

I dared to open my eyes.

"Okay?"

"Yeah." I swallowed. I gazed around me, laughing. "Okay!"

The city was transformed.

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Sights sang and sounds blazed.

The world is very big, and we are very small. From the little data granted us by our senses, we extrapolate a model of the world, and we call this model "reality." But we know next to nothing of the real richness of things.

Or put it another way:

Once upon a time, three blind sages ran across an elephant.

"What is it?" cried the sages, confronted by this unusual obstacle. One touched the elephant's leg. "A tree!" he pronounced.

The second blind sage reached up and touched the elephant's ear. "And here's a leaf!" he exclaimed.

Just then, the elephant nudged the third sage with his trunk. "A snake!" he screamed.

What if, for a second, they could see? What if, suddenly, out of nowhere, lightning struck them, relieving them of their blindness, and showed them the elephant as it *was*—not merely as they modeled it?

The smoked-glass surfaces of Centro, Rio's business district, caught the last of the sunlight feverishly, swooping and trembling like Bernard Herrmann's serrated *Psycho* strings, and the redbrick favelas groaned like whales. Below us, the private pools of Rio's wealthy whistled back and forth like flutes in a primitive rondo. The curl of the surf on Bonito made absurd little trills through a comb and paper, and the boy's red plastic helmet was an affront of bass strings.

"Like a bird!" the boy cried again, as though he had sensed the change that had taken place behind my eyes and now he was trying, gamely but inadequately, to keep up. Sights sang; sounds blazed; I was—to borrow Dr. Deavens's phrase—"in the zone."

I swallowed (and the sound of tongue against palate crumbled before my eyes like a perished green tennis ball).

The boy began our descent.

I wondered how long I could expect these strange crossed-wire sensations—sights for sounds, sounds for sights—to last. Perhaps Katja should drive us home tonight, I decided—though it would not be easy to persuade her. She was nervous of all these unfamiliar streets, this cavalier driving style they had here, and all the many police Volkswagen Beetles still in their outdated liveries, *Policia Militar* stenciled on their doors, and an insignia of crossed pistols.

Then, as suddenly as they had been visited upon me, the visions fled. Sights were sights again, sounds purely sounds. The golden downpour ceased as abruptly as if God had wrenched a tap.

Rio was Rio again.

One second we were hovering over the beach, and Katja was waving frantically and mechanically like a wind-up toy from her table by the drinks stand; the next we were shooting across the sand, rising, stalling, falling, landing, feet sinking into sand still scalding from the afternoon. A breeze crossed my face full of the smells of coconut and burnt sugar and sun-tan oil cut with Atlantic salt, and I was laughing with the pleasure of

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everything and the boy was helping me out of my harness, crying: "Like a bird! Like a bird!"

I wanted him to whistle again.

Katja came over and hugged me and led me back to her table. There was a caipirinha waiting for me, ice chilling the glass so much, condensation dripped from its sides. "I'll drive us back," she said. "You drink, you deserve it."

I drank, and pressed my cold lips against the creases at the corners of her eyes and lips so that she laughed and pushed me away.

I kissed her again, on the lips. The gifts Dr. Deavens had awakened in my head puttered and sparked, and the taste of my wife's mouth—sweet with coconut, tart as a lime—was to me then as a crisp white sheet, rent by a rusty wheel.

"I can't bear this," Katja said.

Her voice shook so badly, I took the folder out of her hands, put the photographs back inside, and placed the folder on the seat beside me, where she wouldn't have to look at it.

The others seated around us on the terrace—all couples, all local, all older than us—looked on curiously. The evening gloom compelled them to peer at us; then, sensing they were straining too hard, too obviously, they looked quickly away. Indiscretion discovered? (Whispering, they catalogued the possibilities.) Confession? Blackmail, even!

The Os Erquilos lends itself to romantic fancy. It claims to be the oldest restaurant in Rio. And its location—perched on a dirt cliff deep in the Tijuca—gives it a glamor exceeding even its colonial pedigree.

A hummingbird darted in out of the darkness, drawn by lamps hung from the terrace roof. It hovered, whining, and drank from a feeding bottle of sugar solution, hung there to entertain the diners.

"It's only for a year," I said. "Katja."

"This isn't work."

"Of course it's work."

"This is—"

"What?"

She said it. "This is monstrous," she said.

Imagine smelling shapes. Imagine seeing sounds. Imagine experiencing distinct visual hallucinations whenever the phone rings. Imagine an unpleasant scratchy sensation accompanying your every glimpse of—this is just an example—the color red.

There is, in fact, an outside chance that you know *exactly* what this cross-wired existence might feel like. That would be because you live with these experiences every day—because you are, to use the shorthand, "synaesthetic."

Synaesthesia is a rare condition of the healthy brain. Over the years synaesthesia has been considered both a benign dysfunction (a "short-circuiting" of the senses), and an exceptional mental ability (synaesthetes are often creative people of higher-than-average intelligence).

Something else—and this explains why I was so willing to play guinea-

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pig in Dr. Deavens's experiments. Like every synaesthete before me, like every synaesthete to come—like every synaesthete who happens to read this—I was living on borrowed time.

Day by day, year by year, we lose our gifts.

Little by little, we become like everybody else.

Toward the end of March 1997—this is years before the Rio Project was ever thought of—my father succumbed at last to his cancer. I was there by his bedside to the end.

The next day, barely able to believe that my vigil was over, I went to the funeral directors' to view his body for the last time. But if I had expected to walk away with a sense of closure, Dad had other ideas. He looked infinitely healthier in death than he had in the hospice. There's a trace of Spanish blood in us, and it had somehow floated to the surface of him: he looked as grave and weathered as a conquistador. Pointed white beard. Sinewy hands. His face lined and tanned. I remember his eyelashes. I had never really noticed them before, not even during those final, grueling nights. His lashes were long and straight and regular—had they been combed?

A week after the funeral, I returned to Cambridge. There didn't seem anything else for me to do. And I would probably have left at the end of that term, had I not made the acquaintance of an MIT neuroscience professor called Dr. Deavens.

I liked his drive, his sense of mission. I admired the "can-do" attitudes that were his birthright as an American. And I had spent so long contemplating death's mysteries, that it actually came as a relief to discover how shallow he was, emotionally. I found that Deavens, a cheery authoritarian, could stand in for my father without ever impinging upon Dad's memory. In this way, and without ever being aware of it, Dr. Deavens helped me through my bereavement.

Our work together—Deavens's and mine—went something like this:

"Lie still."

The curtains are drawn over the window, but they are thin, and greenish sunlight soaks easily through the material, illuminating a room filled with all the electronic paraphernalia of Dr. Deavens's profession. Retrofitted ECT machine. Projector. Microphone. Digital camera.

The MRI scanner hums to itself as it mulls its way through cross-sections of my brain. (Rumor has it that the machine itself is noiseless, and the manufacturers have added an extraneous hum to comfort the patients.)

Dr. Deavens checks the drip in my arm, my pupils, his watch. "Ready?"

My head is a mass of wires, tape, and bandages, wrapped like cobwebs, binding me to the trolley. I breathe deeply, and, by a tremendous effort of will, I force myself to relax. "Ready," I say, and they wheel me deeper into the recesses of the machine.

The MRI does not need wires: it probes my skull with radioactive fingers. The wires are connecting me to an old Electro-Convulsive Therapy machine—one retrofitted for our own, subtle purposes.

Flick of switch.

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Suddenly, everything becomes immanent—magical—pregnant with mysterious possibility—

"I—"

"What is it?"

I'm peering cross-eyed out of the MRI tunnel, unable to move my head. I think it's Dr. Deavens standing at the tunnel mouth but I can't seem to get him into focus. The filtered light—a flat, greenish gloaming—reduces his features to planes of shadow. When I try to follow them, they slip seamlessly behind the glimmering, machined edges of the scopes and screens around the trolley, twine their way into the anatomical posters whose curious traceries decorate the walls; or simply fold themselves up in the plastic volutes of a mobile screen.

"Start the tape," he says.

We begin with something simple. Music. At first, not even music: A toy synthesizer emits a pure, electronic tone.

"Higher notes are more distinct," I report. "Their shape gets more defined as they rise. They tend to go into strands more as well. The strands point diagonally. They tend to meet in one corner. Bottom left or top right. I have a sensation of motion, a sense of perspective, but it's not very clear."

"Colors?"

"Nothing. I have the impression that lower notes are darker. I think I'm trying too hard."

And I'm thinking, *You fool. You never get it back. You never get it back. You never get it back.*

Piano. Bartok. The ghetto-blaster can't handle the CD, it keeps skipping and juddering, and Dr. Deavens keeps muttering, "Oh, for God's sake," like this is something I can do anything about.

Bartok, now: something near the beginning of *Microcosmos*, his piano primer: "Blue, planar, not a natural blue, cyan strips. Strips? It's not, no—wait! What *was* that?"

Deavens nudges the skip-back button.

"Jesus!"

"What?"

"Jesus!"

"What? Saul?"

"Saul, talk to me."

So, restored, enchanted, I begin. "Crinkled paper. Tissue paper. Origami. Feltish at the bottom. Darker, too, along the edge and *CHRIST!*"

Though we did not know it at the time, this was our first step down the primrose path; the seed of what would come to be known as "the Rio project."

But a great part of the work was conducted on a farm far to the northwest of Rio, in the region called Minas Gerais.

Whenever we visited, the man in charge there—Cambridge geneticist Hank Hollis, a long-term resident in Brazil—would display a quite extraordinary attitude to poor Dr. Deavens: as though he were being introduced to the not particularly bright head of a backwoods African state.

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"I trust the drive was congenial?" he asked. *Congenial*, for heaven's sake!

Dr. Deavens's stone-washed Calvin Kleins and big hands and green eyes suggested an advertisement for American cigarettes.

"Do you find the heat *oppressive*?"

It was a relief when, these agonizing preliminaries over, he showed us into the piggery.

"Can it stand?" Deavens asked, peering into the only occupied stall.

Gamely, Daisy struggled to her feet, slid, slumped, and rolled onto her back. She honked: a comical sound.

"Her sense of balance isn't what it was, poor dear," Hollis confessed, earning a stern look from me. "Well," he said, defensively, pointing to where her left ear had been, "you can see why for yourself."

A three-year-old sow of indeterminate breed, Daisy had been purchased from transgenics laboratories in Argentina. For some days, Hollis told us, she had required round-the-clock monitoring and assistance.

Hollis explained to Deavens the growths he had cultivated, tending the cancerous seeds in the quick of Daisy's jaw to their present, full flowering. He related them in simple terms to the brand-new, never-before-experienced senses we were hoping to invent.

"Can it *eat?*" Deavens asked.

"She's on a liquid diet now, poor love."

"How does it see?"

"Her left eye—well you can see how that is. Oh, but she does like to spot a familiar face with her right!"

So Hollis's dismal sentimentality carried the day. I had categorically forbidden Hollis to show Deavens his snapshots of Daisy as a piglet, but I caught him leafing through them just the same, in a private moment.

The morning after our disastrous evening at the Os Erquilos, I awoke to a hectic vision of my wife: barely dressed in a pair of cut-off jeans and a *fio dental* bikini top.

"Have you seen my scrunchie?" she said.

"Your what?"

"My scrunchie. For my hair."

I lay there, paralyzed by the effort of translation.

"Oh, I'll use a stocking," she said. She took one out of her underwear drawer and tied her hair back with it.

"Oh," I said. "Your *scrunchie.*"

"Yes?"

"I haven't seen it."

She slung a pair of in-line skates over her shoulder and headed for the door. A cheap yellow earpiece radio was strapped to her upper arm.

"Katja?"

"Yes?"

"What—what are you—?"

"What am I?"

"What are you doing?"

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"I'm off rollerblading."
"Where?"
"Round the Lagoa."
"Like *that*?"
"Everybody else does."

She reached into her jacket where it hung by the door, got her wallet, and rammed it into her jeans. Her legs were very white. "I'm here to enjoy myself, apparently." With a slam of the door, she was gone.

I got myself a long glass of water and some aspirin and went back to bed. Around eleven, I got up and shambled around the apartment. A Jorge Amado novel lay open beside Katja's beanbag. Her Filofax lay open on the table, and a pad of airmail paper, untouched.

I went out for some bread and managed to pick up the last half a dozen rolls. I ate a yogurt. I ate another.

Now it was two PM. I turned on the TV. I turned it off again. I wanted to go for a walk, to visit the Jardim Botanico. But I thought that Katja might ring. I wanted the chance to set things right with her. I stayed by the phone, rehearsing likely conversations. But no matter how I began them, they all ended badly.

For our stay in Rio, the project had rented us an apartment in Urca. Cobbled alleys lead away from the sea-wall, where lovers come in the evening to coo and kiss and skim pebbles over the turquoise water.

Black men from the North drink cane juice by day, lace it with rum at night, and laugh easily together as they wander the alleys. Students crowd the ice cream parlors and leave by nightfall. Pale tourists rubberneck the houses, relieved to find that somewhere at the heart of Rio's concrete confection there is still an "old quarter." But there is little else for them—a bread stand that sells out by mid-morning; a handful of bars built for late nights and cards and cachaça; some unspectacular eating houses.

Over all towers the black, sheer-sided rock the locals call "Açúcar"—the Sugarloaf. Our kitchen window looked straight out on it. When it rained, the rock looked as black and shiny as spilt wax. Water ran down it smoothly, in a sheet, and the wind caught it and made fan patterns over the rock; fern patterns. The rock was so close to the kitchen window, when it rained, it was like you could dive through the window, straight into it.

But it wasn't raining.

I wrote Katja a note, left it on the table, went to the door, went back, amended the note, went out, got as far as the sea wall, and came back. I was digging in my pocket for the key when the phone started to ring.

"Katja?"
"Where *were* you?"
"Are you all right?"
She was crying. "Where *were* you?"

Most of us have memories we recall from childhood, of a time when everything around us rang and shook, as though the world were too big for our senses to contain, and something, some internal system, some division had to go, some dike to burst.

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(Katja says: "I remember a storm. I was young. A baby. I remember the light on the water: how it rang.")

When we are very small, we are all synaesthetic. Every one of us. As babies, we are still forming our models of the world. The models are wet and doughy; experience can still twist them, even rend them asunder. At that age, we frequently perceive one sense through the apparatus of another: visions for sounds, smells for textures.

This is where a child's sense of magic comes from. The child senses, in the way an adult never can, how big the world really is.

(Katja says: "Let me read your work.")

This sense of immanence survives into adulthood only rarely. Perhaps we recall, in quiet moments, how the world once trembled and shifted to accommodate us. If we rationalize this feeling at all, we call it Grace, and hope by prayer to get it back again.

(Katja says: "Tell me about your father.")

But we cannot. The child's soft model of the world begins to harden. Order is imposed. The language instinct kicks in. Communication begins.

This is the price of language: that everything comes to mean something. Things can no longer just *be*.

Some people spend their lives trying to see things as they really are again. Artists struggle to grasp a pure innocence of vision, mathematicians yearn to see the dance of numbers, singers long for perfect pitch.

(Katja says: "I want to make you happy.")

But it goes. Sooner or later, it goes.

Whenever Dr. Deavens writes about the "Rio Project," he is punctilious in listing his many industrial sponsors. But—as that enterprising *Wired* journalist revealed the other week—those names are a blind. Ultimately, Deavens's purse strings are controlled by the US National Reconnaissance Office.

Deavens convinced the Pentagon that he could extend human perception of electromagnetic radiation far beyond the visible spectrum. The longed-for integration between human- and digital-sourced intelligence was at hand, he said.

Deavens told them he was going to put the field agent back in business, strangely enhanced—and not a tell-tale mirrorshade in sight.

The room where I woke after my operation might have been anywhere. Artificial flowers. A radio playing. Dr. Deavens sat by the bed, smiling and stroking my arm as though I were his newborn.

I looked for Katja. She wasn't there. I tried to speak, to ask where she was. Something jagged caught in my throat. I spluttered, hooted, swallowed razors.

Deavens squeezed my hand. He was out of his greens and back into his trademark Levi's. "Don't speak," he said. "I've brought you pen and paper."

While I was writing my question, he held up a mirror.

"You see?" he said.

* * *

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Once I had recovered from my operation, Dr. Deavens had no more reason to keep me in the hospital. I was far too valuable to be left to my own devices, and far too strange to be walking about Rio on my own, so the project assigned me a security detail. Every day they walked me round the Lagoa, Rio's huge, centrally located lake. It was their idea, not mine. I went half in hope, half in trepidation, thinking I might meet Katja coming the other way. Tanned by now, energized by her new freedom; or embittered and lonely. Both.

I never saw her.

"Home" for me now consisted of a large wood-frame house bordering the derelict Parque Lage. The park leads from the shores of the Lagoa all the way up the Corcovado to Paul Landowski's massive statue of Christ the Redeemer. The house was old, dating back to the heyday of the Parque Lage, when Rio's coffee aristocracy spent Sundays promenading its terraces and fairy-tale bridges, snatching stolen intimate moments in its grottoes and plasterwork hollows and caves. These days, intimacy consists of puddles of broken glass, the leavings of little fires, and condom wrappers scattered beneath the trees.

I didn't have anyone much to talk to. Besides, I was tanked so full of opiates and novocaine, I wouldn't have been much company. Dr. Deavens's personal contribution to my mental well-being was a local psychotherapist by the name of Patrício Macário. Occasionally, Deavens would give him tests and questionnaires for me, to flatter him into thinking he was part of our project.

But Macário, refreshingly, wasn't remotely interested—not even when I started experiencing regular and intrusive synaesthesias. (I didn't like to say so, but Macário's face produced its own, distinct, synaesthetic response in me: a long, wavering squeal, such as a child might make on comb-and-paper.)

"Synaesthesias are the building blocks of thought!" I told him once. I explained to him that my brain was trying to figure out how to use the strange new sense organs Deavens and Hollis had given me. And how it was only at the most primitive level of thought—the level of synaesthesias—that my brain could hope to establish communication with them.

(So, in the exact same way, the LSD-addled brain rewires itself around blocked and damaged synapses, and, in doing so, showers the user's inner eye with shards of trippy synaesthetic color.)

"Really?" Macário tented his fingers before his mouth. "Well, well, well."

Katja did not visit me. And if she meant any kind of communication by the presents she sent, it was in a code I couldn't break. *The Shipping News* by E. Annie Proulx. *Little Apple* by Leo Perutz. Jorge Amado's *The Violent Land*. I recognized it as the book she'd been reading the day she went to skate round the Lagoa.

"I see you finished the Amado," I wrote. (I was reduced to writing her letters.) "I wonder what you thought of it." "I wonder what you're doing now." "Katja, what the fuck is going on?"—angrily, I hatched it out.

I wrote: "I want to convince you that it's me underneath this. Of course 'convincing' you isn't the right way to think about it. As if smart argu-

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ments ever built trust! My nurse, Jennifer (Hicks—the fat one) tries to be helpful. She says I should 'just be myself.' I told her, 'being oneself' is impossible. It's like trying to bottle sunshine."

Very witty. Very urbane. Try as I might, I couldn't find the right tone of address.

Hollis didn't help. His contribution to the experiment was more or less at an end. But he showed no signs of leaving. He spent his days reading football magazines, his evenings at the Maracãna stadium, chewing compulsively at nasty foamy biscuits, riveted to the league fortunes of Fluminense and the footwork of Paulo César. Watching him stack my groceries away, it was hard to keep in mind the very real and serious contributions he had made to the project.

On my insistence, he went round to the apartment in Urca a few times, and, returning, he painted me such an asinine picture of Katja's life, that I began to forget why it was I was writing. "I hear you've had the hallway painted!" I wrote once. And, "Fancy being offered ear drops for an eye infection!"

I wrote: "Everybody tells me you're looking well. They tell me you have a tan. I think of you often, skating round the Lagoa, and something happened yesterday—something broke in me, some feckless, anxious thing I'd carried with me all the way from Cambridge. Suddenly, I imagined your hair in that girlish scrunchie, and your tan, and the light on the water, and you were no longer someone I had to normalize, to *contain*."

"It reads like a goodbye," said Jennifer Hicks.

"Well, you can just *fuck off*."

"Saul! You asked me!"

This was the first of several letters I would never send. But by then, the collapse of my marriage was all of a piece with Dr. Deavens's twisted, flattened face, hectoring me every day from the video-conference suite of a five-star hotel in Shenzhen, or Singapore, or Vientiane, or wherever the international lecture circuit had landed him that day: "*What do you see, Saul? Saul, tell me what you see!*"

This is what I see.

The sun, reflected off the window of the bar opposite my window, is the flavor of cinnamon and the backs of stamps. Its brightness puts into partial silhouette the head of a man sitting at a pavement table under a parasol advertising "Brahma Cola." He is in his thirties, and bears the years poorly: Stick arms, a stomach like a pudding, fat thighs squeezed together, thin ankles in fawn socks. Bad suit—a blue the taste of liquorice. Yellow tie like chewed paper. White shirt like paint fumes.

I take my seat and flop my chin onto the padded rest they've made for me. Draw up the telescope; spin the wheel on its shock-proof mounting and

Out—

Through the telescope, I watch him.

Beep-beep—frown—Beep-beep—fumble—Beep-beep—flip—Beep-beep— "*Darling!*" A woman's voice; I hear it in my head.

"Honey! How are you?" *Honeyhowareyou* ignites the sky with sherbet colors, silky soft and hot as a sun's interior.

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"Love, I need your help."
"What's up?" he says.
"I need to get some shopping in."
"So go."
"I can't just leave her!"
"She'll be fine."
"You haven't seen her. Her temperature's much worse."
"I'll have to cancel—"
"Cancel, then."
And so he does.
Now—*follow* . . .
Flavors: Star Anise and cotton wool. Tar. The sap of grass stalks.
Textures: Chalk and celery leaves.
Form: a ring doughnut, the colors variable, yet typical of old bruises.
Follow . . .

Call from mobile to office. From office to office. From office to mobile. Inputs into office data system. Internal email. Another. Internet message. Call from office landline to office landline. Received e-mail. Three phone calls. Fifteen e-mails. Twenty-seven phone calls. (My target's trace is fading, overwritten like a palimpsest.) Five hundred and twelve internal office memoranda—seven hundred and ninety-two bulletin board submissions—Two thousand, six hundred and eight cheap-rate local phone calls—and gone. Absorbed at last, my target's call is history.

Regroup. Recount. It's quarter to five—forty-five minutes into the experiment—before I lose all trace of cotton wool, all sense of chalk. What have I learned? What sensed? What seen? Turning from the window, I look about my room.

I deserve better than this sugar-pink striped wallpaper, this nylon carpet, this cheap laminated furniture. Give me a wet and lightless labyrinth or give me a castle decked with velvet and swan's down—but not this! A motel minotaur, I shamble to my desk.

A notebook computer dozes there. Hit spacebar. The screen comes alive, the hard disk squeals into action, and a red spark the flavor of fountain pen ink shivers up from the belly of the box.

There is an established procedure to this, a form I have to follow.

But what I want to write is this:

From my aerie on the corner of the Avenida Presidente Vargas and the Rua da Alfândega, deep in the heart of Centro, I watch as office workers raise their mobiles to their lips and vomit flame into the air.

They dress in Jaeger, Klein, and Hugo Boss. Their shoes are handmade. One wrist is bound by a wrinkle of blue flame. (Casios pulse, Rolexes shine.) Their hair is often dark, and always soberly cut. They walk with confidence, and often, as they walk, they vomit fire, the jets criss-crossing, making a crazy cat's-cradle in the air.

Flame gushes from their mouths like water from a geyser. Flame bursts through office windows, through the roofs of cabs, through the greasy fan of an umbrella; once, through the pavement directly below my window. A woman walked by and the beam split her in two, quite harmlessly; as she walked away, I saw she was left-handed, for it was her right

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wrist that was ringed with blue—a Timex by its epileptic shimmer (I am learning).

Flame plays tic tac toe on the grilles and manhole covers. In the window of the bar opposite my room, flame licks the blunted mouthparts of an old sugar-cane juicer.

Flames scale the lightning conductors of tall buildings and play upon the chrome door-handles of the police Volkswagens.

The Rio project was a famous disaster. At the time of writing, it seems that every possible recrimination has been gone over and gone over to the point of tedium. It seems invidious of me now to rake over old ground.

But the project's central failing remains: no one had thought to fashion lids for my new eyes.

It became impossible for me to work. Cowering in the corner of my fourth-floor room, my face, grotesque and swollen, hidden behind my knees, I longed for respite from the flames that leapt from mobile phone to junction box to screen to ear through Centro's toasted air.

Hollis fashioned me a kevlar sleeping mask and, when that failed, goggles painted with lead. But every attempt to shield me from my too-potent gifts only seemed to prick their appetite. At night, tossing restlessly about in my cot in the house in Parque Lage, I flung my arms over my eyes, but the city's ceaseless electrical activity burned its way effortlessly through my flesh, and struck dizzying sparks from the hardened vessels that were my other eyes.

"Here we are!" Hollis announced one evening, bustling into the house in Parque Lage with shopping bags full of boxes of aluminum foil.

"What's all that for?"

"For your bedroom!"

"Oh not the windows!"

Three layers of foil went over them, two over the walls, three over the ceiling.

"What are they?"

"Foil survival bags." He tore them down the sides with a Stanley knife and spread them into sheets. "You'd put your foot through ordinary foil in five seconds, so we'll use these for the floor."

He left me with a mirrored cell.

"I can't sleep in here!"

"What's the matter?" Hollis was proud of his handiwork. "The more sensitive you get," he said, "we can just add more layers of foil."

"You're enjoying this, aren't you?"

At last, Hollis rang Dr. Deavens and told him to move me to the Minas Gerais compound, where the electrical activity would be less blinding.

Dr. Deavens didn't listen. He had too much riding on the timely success of the project. *"What do you see, Saul? Saul, tell me what you see!"*

The mattress of my truckle bed is soaked with sweat. The caramelized air of the street mingles with the smell of vomit.

In, and out, and in—electric breakers crash and splinter against the knots of hardened tissue buried in my face. Storm-wracked, guts heaving,

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I close my eyes against the golden rain that pours from Rio's sky. (Yet now, behind my screwed-shut eyes, the rain is falling still.)

The door rises out of the foil-lined floor like a island. The floor rises and falls. Everything is spiraling. The door rushes up at me. It flings itself aside.

"Saul!"

The hallway swallows me. It carries me down its length in one single, gargantuan spasm, and spits me out onto an unlit gravel drive, a flight of shattered steps.

Behind me, I can hear footsteps at a run. I heave myself over the parapet of a stucco bridge and stagger through the undergrowth. Lengths of lead piping from defunct fountains curl around my feet like roots.

"Saul! *Saul!*" But they are far behind me now.

The ground opens up beneath me. Escalators lick me down a bright white throat. A metro pulls to a halt in front of me. Its doors become hands and pull me inside.

There's a hammering by my ear and I look round to see Hollis, white-faced, hammering on the window, but the train is already moving—however did I get here?—and darkness swallows Hollis; it swallows the platform with its advertisements for Brahma and Rio Sul beer; darkness swallows the light, and with it, every drop of golden rain.

The metro carriage is clean, modern and spacious. There are about fifteen people in here with me. Everything is calm.

Opposite me, a child balances on her mother's knees, face hidden in her hair, and wails. The mother shoots me a look somewhere between disgust and embarrassment. The sight of me has made her little girl cry.

Otherwise I am studiously ignored.

I like this. I like this peace. I like the efficient air conditioning. I like the shiny platforms.

Hollis has surely raised the alarm by now and Dr. Deavens's suits, imagining who knows what horrors—defection, kidnap, ransom, vivisection—will be combing the city for me. And yet, in their panic, people assume I must be long gone—spirited away to God knows what aerie or refuge; God knows whose prison, clinic, or lab. The idea I might still be spooling about Rio's tiny metro system doesn't seem to have occurred to them. I am hiding, quite literally, under their noses. Conditions are ideal here for me: shielded by a weight of earth and reinforced concrete and steel paneling from the upper world, my man-made senses cool and darken, my many eyes find rest.

Seven days later. Mid-evening. The air, which all day had been setting like a jelly over the city, was slick and sweet with rush-hour exhaust. I was walking east down Pecheco Leãdro, where the odor of corrupted caramel was overlaid with the smells of chicken fried with mushrooms and raisins, palm-heart pizza, artichokes and melted cheese. In the window of the Covi Flor, sunburned backpackers shoveled their way through plates piled with freijitas and rice. Opposite, darkness welled over the high wall concealing the botanical gardens.

Rio's pavements are made of black and white mosaics arranged in sim-

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ple, geometric designs. Behind Ipanema, bars and swimwear boutiques line the Avenida Vieira Santa. Orchids sprout from window boxes hung from bedroom windows. After a while of this, gripped by a sudden claustrophobia, I dropped down to the Copacabana. It was drenched in chill, magnesium-white streetlight. Across the highway that separates city and beach, a nightclub turned on its sign, blood-red through the thin mist. It said: "Help."

A thin, energetic halo hung over Rio's business district: automated financial transactions hyphenated the air like tracer fire. Behind the windows of the high-rises, digital fires bloomed and leapt. I shielded my eyes against the unearthly light show; even after a week of hiding and hoboing beneath Rio's streets, my new eyes were still sore.

I dog-legged my way across the peninsula until I came out among familiar streets, in the heart of Urca, only a minute's distance from our apartment.

Bells were mounted by the side of the door, but I had forgotten which one was ours, and had to peer in the awkward light to read the labels.

"Hello?" Katja said, her voice fuzzed by the cheap intercom.

Behind me, I heard a car approach.

"Hello?"

I turned. The car slid by. It was black, expensive—official? I thought it was for me. I thought I had been followed. I tried to see inside, but the windows were mirrored.

"Hello."

Reflected off the windows, there was a face.

A lopsided pig's face. It grinned back at me.

Daisy's face, riddled with clever cancers.

"Saul?"

I could hear her fear.

I stepped out of the square of frosted light, and walked away.

No way could Dr. Deavens keep me in Rio after that: not against Hollis's medical advice; not without my cooperation.

For weeks prior to the operation to restore my face, Deavens and Hollis wrangled over my mental state and the project's future and the value of the results and how much supervision I required. Meantime, Katja flew back to England, hired a solicitor, and began divorce proceedings.

So there I was, in Rio, alone, among the shreds of my life.

A funny carry-on, that was. Drinking every night at a chopperia on the Avenida Vieira Santa, bodyguards in the car across the street, waiters trying not to look me in the eyes. The girls, their Ipanema tans, their lips; their horror.

Rio raining everywhere, salving my wounded face.

"You're *crying*. . . ."

It took a moment for me to refocus. It took me a couple of seconds to drop from Rio's electrical world, back into my own.

The first thing I saw, as my eyes readjusted to the world, was a hand. I remember it clearly, laid upon my own; the wedding ring was so loose now on its wizened finger, only a miracle could be keeping it there. I looked up,

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and into the clear blue eyes of the old woman who had stopped to comfort me. Down the road someone was strumming the chords to Antonio Carlos Jobim's "The Girl from Ipanema."

I said, "It's only the rain." The gutters were full to overflowing; it spilled across the mosaic pavements, eddied about our feet, then swirled and headed out to sea.

She was kind, and worried for me. "There's no rain, dear."

I said to her: "When I was a kid—"

I began again: "When dad drove off to work in the mornings, he'd bash out a tattoo on the horn for me, and there would be these red flashes behind my eyes. No, not flashes," I corrected myself. "*Shapes.* Bright red shiny bubbles."

The old woman, frowning, walked on.

I looked up, slit-eyed, into the downpour. I opened my mouth. To drink? To drown?

Rio poured, and poured, and poured.

What else is there to tell?

Back in England, and with my face more or less restored, I picked up a job quite quickly. A team at Hull University wished to study the prevalence of synaesthesia among autistic children.

It's good to be working again. Grudgingly, the university has given us the funding to buy three old (1990 vintage) Elcot MF1000 ECT machines, all modified to identical specifications (thereby voiding the manufacturer's warranty—*shhh!*). We've lined them up in a row in the center of our cavernous, inadequately lit basement laboratory. (It's littered with reminders of previous tenants. A blender mill. A capillary-column cutter. A shattered glove-box. Tubing. Gloves. A cable turtle. A big white box we can't understand.)

I insisted on being our first human subject. In case something went wrong (though we were very careful). Because I had been here before and I knew what to expect.

Or because I was desperate for one last taste of the powers I had lost?

But all my former transformations had taken their toll, and, try as I might, set the machine how I would, the world remained stubbornly itself.

The others had a great time: gleefully they fought over the wires, the skull-caps. They haggled for extra turns: kids desperate for one more go on the sensory roller-coaster.

I smiled. I took notes.

But I heard no colors, and I saw no sounds. ○

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the dark man

you think the dark man knows
what you cannot
because the dark man grows
as stars grow and die

no he lives longer than knowing

but come inside
be the dark man

watch the seasons wax
& wane like cricket clicks
watch the years go by
in epileptic flicker

only distant stars have
motion slow enough
for comfort

(of course stars gyre around as his planet spins
the dark man sees them as lines
bright circles moving stately through millenniums)

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the dark man is ignorant of your life
any life is gone before it registers

whole cultures grow and prevail
and stumble and fall

whole species do

while he decides about
whether to face east or south

stars are born and die while he thinks about this
(bright white stars that no one will miss)

face south he decides

watch this sun die

—Joe Haldeman

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PERFECT PILGRIM

Jim Grimsley

At the time of this writing, Jim Grimsley tells us he is being held captive by a group of fanatical theater artists at the O'Neill Playwriting Conference. The author is also working on his new novel, *Old Sky*, which is due out later this year from Tor. Both the novel and this novelette are set in the Hormling universe.

The traveler arrives on Sha-Nal. Here he must learn to say Senal, for this is the name of the world in the living tongue, as it is spoken in the kosh, the here and now, on the surface of the Hormling home. He arrives at the center after many separate journeys, leaving the place where he was born, as any good child will do, when the home hearth has too little food, room, warmth, even too little entropy, to spare. Time has come for his pilgrimage, to find his place in the One Law, and so he has traveled to the center of the universe, Sha-Nal the holy, where the Hormling journeyed to find the Mage in the tens of thousands of years ago, history emerging out of the then. As this pilgrim has emerged out of the then of himself, though only twenty-two years of it, the not-so-long-ago of Ess, which is his name.

Four days have passed since he arrived at the Temple of Law in Nedai. The journey itself was a story, traveling from the merchant pod in which he was born, Pod Odo, one of the trading stations near the edge of the Oort cloud, where trading ships can dock without descending into the deep well of the star. Four weeks to cross the cloud, most of it in stasis, to save breathings and feedings. Followed by many days of questioning in Skygard, biological processing, adjustment of his interface, permission for his visit to the surface, clearance to remain on Senal for the one hundred days of his pilgrimage, application for employment should he fail the pilgrimage and earn deportation from the surface. One hundred days to find a place for himself, on this world of billions.

In the kosh, he is hardly weary, Ess the traveler, for the people of the Temple have made him welcome, and everywhere he turns are new faces, new breathings. On the home pod, a breathing was merely another burden, and the question was always, should we space this one to save air for others, or should we rear it to know sorrow and pain? All his life, he has

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been a weight on his parents, doing nothing to earn his air, but now he has come to Senal, where the air is free.

The Nedai temple is one of the largest in all the cult, and has the advantage of its location in the port city, where its land mass abuts an ocean, a huge mass of salt water, a geographic feature Ess has studied in school but never before seen. The ocean is a miracle of motion and sound, though he has only seen it from the observation platforms along the western edge of Nedai. This is his first ocean, and his first city, at the same time. A city is a pod many times over, and Nedai reaches deep into the rock of Senal. Nedai is tied to the spinning of Senal as all things here are tied to her, but this is not like the rotation of a pod-ring, which makes centrifugal force; the spinning of Senal makes day and night. Day is a time of the sun and night is a time of the dark. The dark is like home, the light of the stars and the black outside the pod, moving as the pod spins.

In the day, which is the strangest kind of time for Ess, he wonders how the sun can grow so big. He is ignorant in all ways it is possible to be ignorant, he thinks sometimes, as he wanders in the open parks, the public spaces near the surface, and those beneath, which share the sun as well. While he is far underground in the city, he is still surrounded with the light of day, and in a park, looking overhead, he may see the sky as bright as if he were beneath it. In the underground complex of the Temple, Magye catches him staring at the sky and smiles. "It's not real, you know."

He nods. "Yes."

"The sunlight is real. But the sky's a projection."

"I do understand. Yes. But it's still strange to me."

Magye is the lead middlewam in Ess's crèche, and carries the title Chief Nurturer of Pilgrims. Ess has never seen a human of the middlewam variety before and is still unsettled by its appearance. In the middlewam, most gender-specific mechanisms were stripped out of its DNA after conception and long before birth. It is as free of gender as is possible for a human to be, and therefore, to many of the Hormling religions, the middlewam is holy. Many of the particles of Hanson were middlewams, which gives them special status in the Cult of Law, and therefore to Ess as well, who stares at Magye in awe, attempting to see neither man nor woman in its face. He finds its expressions difficult to read, and he hears, or imagines, a steady neutrality in its voice. It asks—Magye asks, "Is Ess the pilgrim finding his journey here to be a fruitful use of the kosh?"

"My kosh is renewed," Ess assures it, looking into placid eyes. "I have never felt more present in the now. There's so much new to see."

"Can I help you in any way?"

"You're nice to ask. I'm only on the fourth day. I have six days to find a coupling that will satisfy. Then I'll know whether to stay in Nedai or move on."

Magye nods, smiling. Its hands move restlessly along the back of the chair. "Maybe Nedai will be kind to you."

Magye walks with Ess among the temple-tenders. He tells her about his affinity testing, the many vids and sims he's seen today, in the course of seeking placement into some job here. Magye nods as if listening, but patiently surveys their surroundings as they walk. The temple provides

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care for many living machines that are at the end of their life cycle; such machines are the best exemplars of the path to Law, the sacrifice of the organic to control and direct the mechanical. To rule the machine, we must *become* the machine, as Hanson teaches. Magye has shown Ess the many faces of this temple's population of aged sentients, has introduced him to the many possible variants of life and sensation available to those who choose to become the machine. It is possible that Ess will sacrifice himself and join to a device like one of those on display, to become the sentient consciousness of a data bank of a crèche or a server for one of the immortal corporations, blessed be they. He might become the maintenance consciousness for one of the complex storage tanks that serve a large fusion plant, or a chemical storage tank, or the thinking part of a stratoliner. He might be put to some military use. He has been considering the possibilities for weeks, having begun to wonder how he would spend his future long before he left his family and pod. To search for such a coupling in Nedai, he has six more days.

"Come to our sharing-memory tonight. We're living a day in the Metal War. During the emergence of Hanson."

"Maybe I will. How long will it last?"

"Perhaps a measure. The memory-time will seem much longer. Have you ever done a sharing?"

"Not in a group."

"You'll like it. You know, there are places on Senal, whole crèches, where a sharing never stops."

"Never? How do people eat?"

Magye laughs. "The interface can feed you for a while. Individuals move in and out of the sharing, I guess, but the group continues. It's one of the steps necessary for a group awakening, like Hanson's. Here in Nedai, we never go longer than a day-session, ourselves."

Tonight is echoing in his head. Magye has begun to seem more like a woman than a neuter, and he stops, he takes a breath, looks away from its body, wrapped in a cling-robe spraying waves of light in shifting patterns down the phosphors in the threads.

He asks Cooper, the sentient who resides in the retired satellite switching system, a gray box in a lifeboat, what he thinks of Magye. Cooper is a "he" even though he has no body anymore at all; he was born a male and his organic parts, adapted to residence in the machine's life-cradle, retain a male identity. His body was alive for a long time, but when it died, Cooper chose to continue as long as he could in what was left of his brain in the lifeboat. He may have three or four more years left, he says, very calm about the whole proposition of dying. His avatar, when he bothers any longer to project one, is decidedly male; he has shown himself briefly to Ess, a wavering, partly transparent image of a kind man of middle years. Yet the gray box with its invisible voice-production system appears to Ess to have no sex of any kind, and to fit the definition of a neuter all the more readily than Magye.

Cooper answers, "Shalahar is attended only by middlewams. Did you know that?"

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Shalahar, another holy word, names the residence of the core data mass of the Hormling people, the living center, which, in the language used by Ess, Cooper, and Magye, is as much a person as a place, as much a community as a person, as much machine as it is human.

"No. How many?"

"Thousands. Maybe tens of thousands."

"I'd like to see that place one day."

"Never in this world," Cooper answers. "Only converts and middlewams can visit the Core."

"They're so lovely. Magye is lovely, isn't she?"

"Magye is not a *she,*" Cooper says. "It's wrongheaded to like a middlewam that way. It won't like you back."

Ess is blushing. He wonders what kind of optical inputs Cooper bothers with, whether he can see Ess's discomfiture. "I just like it. Magye, I mean."

The memory session begins soon after, during which Ess can hardly fail to notice that Magye pays him no attention at all. The session is held in the temple's dreaming room, each of the dreamers in a standing bed, adjusting the incline to their liking, looking at one another expectantly, including Magye at the far end of the file, giggling with a friend, another middlewam. Such technology for full-immersion entertainments did not exist on Pod Odo, and Ess feels a flutter of tension in his stomach, touching the surface of his interface, currently affixed to the back of his neck. He is still unaccustomed to the ubiquitous nature of the link, and gives his body the wish for calm; the link responds, and soon he feels ease from the adjustment to his body chemistry, calming him, as mist rises for the beginning of the dream.

He has no memory of the sharing itself, only a kind of tearing in his head, as if he is suspended in the moment before a horrible pain comes. Something has gone wrong. When he is conscious again, people are rushing him to a med-room down a narrow corridor, and he is nauseous, waves of sickness passing through him, and he can smell a sour smell on himself, embarrassing bodily fluids on public display. Hands are cleaning him, fingertips are closing his eyes, someone with the proper medical clearance sets his interface for sleep, and he falls asleep.

When he wakes, standing at his bedside is Magye, along with another, older middlewam also dressed in temple robes, and someone in a planetary ministry uniform. By the expectant looks on their faces, he guesses that they have wakened him on purpose. He sits up, surprisingly clear-headed. "What happened?" he asks Magye. "Where am I?"

"In the hospice section of the temple," Magye says. "We found you unconscious at the end of the sharing session."

He tries to remember the session, lays back his head on the comfort, wishes for a way to return the kosh to that moment. "I don't remember anything."

"Do you remember the session at all? Did you share any of the memories?"

"No." He shakes his head. "Only a kind of pain. But it lasted hardly any time, and then I woke when I was being taken out of the dreaming room. I had thrown up on myself."

"The body objects," the older middlewam says. This one has more the

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look of a man, Ess thinks, something about the bones of the face, shoulders, and hips.

"Remarkable," echoes the ministry person.

"Ess, may I introduce my senior in the temple, Elda, along with Arn Mbele from the Planetary Ministry."

The gentleman makes the hand-sign for polite greeting, a custom taught Ess by his maternal grandmother. For some reason, Ess likes the man, Mbele, at once. "Your ten days in Nedai are nearly over."

"You've been unconscious for two days," Magye says.

"Two?"

"Rest is the only cure in a case like yours," Elda explains, as if Ess surely already understands what is his case.

"When there's an illness," says Mbele, fingering his ministry badge, "we're required to make a personal visit. I came myself out of respect for Maester Elda."

The middlewam bowed.

"I've never been sick," Ess says.

"You aren't sick now," Magye answers, "you're only having a strong reaction to the memory." It lays its hand gently, coolly, on his brow.

"We see these reactions now and then," Elda explains, touching its own dry fingertips to Ess's wrist, taking his pulse. "Occasionally, a dreamer strays into a shared memory that his soul already knows."

Magye looks Ess intently in the eye. "We believe you may be a soul of that time and place. We hope you'll agree to more tests."

They are looking at Ess expectantly, even Mbele.

"If you were there, in that dream, you might have known Hanson," Magye explains.

Elda murmurs something, perhaps the line of a prayer. Mbele interjects, after a moment, "The Temple is willing to intervene to extend your stay in Nedai. I'm here on behalf of the ministry to find out whether you consent."

Ess finds his heart to be pounding. He searches Magye's face, anxious at the fervent expression he finds there. Part of him wants to believe the affection comes for other reasons. But they are waiting for an answer. "What happens if nothing comes of this?"

"I don't understand?" Mbele cocks his head politely and adjusts the finely tailored collar of his uniform, perhaps putting some other conversation on hold by touching his thumb to that part of this collar.

"What happens to my hundred days?"

"You risk that nothing happens and you waste more of your days here than you planned."

"So I don't get more days?"

Mbele shakes his head, his perfectly shaped hair never moving, even when he runs his hand along it.

Ess looks at the older middlewam, then, shyly, at Magye. "Why should I say yes?"

"Don't you want to know whether it's true?"

"All I want is a coupling. I want to live on Senal. Can you promise me that?"

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After a while, it shakes its head.

His insides are churning. "I need to think about it. Leave me alone for a moment." Though he already knows, as they are leaving, that he will say yes.

Even on Senal, only a few places exist where the soul can be imaged and traced. The closest of these facilities to Nedai is the city of Qons Qilyan, the summer home of the Mage and the principal training ground for her priests. Maester Elda, a templar of high rank, attends the test with Ess; Magye has receded into the background the last two days, with Ess under the care of a mixed group of medical physicists and relativity theologians. All Ess's questions have been answered ten times over or more. The soul tracing is difficult to obtain even under the best conditions and the test may be unable to locate the requisite clusters of neurons in Ess. He will be given a certain injection to enhance the imaging process, and he will be sedated. The test will take most of a day.

Should his tracing match that of one of the known cohorts of Hanson, or even of someone alive in a peripheral way during that era, it appears that nearly everyone will be very happy, but what then? What will it mean? Ess, a bit frightened, overawed by all the attention, waits in the small, white, antiseptic chamber where gowned middlewam nurses prepare him for entry into the coffin-like tube in which he must lie, his head tightly confined, penetrated through both ears and nose by filamental probes, for several measures of the day. He is to be sedated, deeply, and wonders how this will feel. The contrast agent injected into his bloodstream will make him itchy for a while. He has been told that his soul will feel itself being probed and that he is likely to dream.

"What happens if the test is positive and you learn who I was then?" he asks when Elda has finished reviewing some screen of documentation with one of the physicists.

Elda stands over him, since he is now too woozy from the sedation to do anything but lie prone. The nurse has injected the contrast and waits to see whether he has an allergic reaction that his own interface can't handle. Elda says, "No need to bother you about that until the time comes."

"I'd like to know."

"You're nearly unconscious, you can hardly talk. Listen to you. Why don't you close your eyes? In a while the test will be over and there'll be no more questions."

He likes that thought, as he drifts into the gauze around him, no more questions.

When he is in the chamber, his head in the cylinder, particles streaming through it and colliding with the energy of his cells, then, in that darkness, he remembers the dream from the memory-sharing, or the world as he once knew it, whichever it may be.

A kind woman's face. She is standing in a ruined place, during the war. A kind woman of oddly elongated torso, old enough that her flesh has slackened beyond the reach of tissue regression, creeps among wounded and dying people. Ess is there, behind her. Ess is carrying a bag and realizes that the bag belongs to her, this kindly woman, stooped over—

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He stops and will not remember.

Stoops over a child in the dirt, half-buried in the muck of the city, half-drowned in its own blood, stoops over this carcass of a living child—

He stops.

This is my own day, he thinks, this is a day of my own body, this is my own, I am she, we are within this same shell of stuff that passes time through it in order to live, we are this soul of the same being.

She is stooping over this dead child. She is hungry but no longer feels the pain in her gut, she feels only the body of the child, cool and unnatural, beneath her fingertips. The sound of another raid warning commences, the high-pitched horn announcing an attack, maybe from the ground, maybe from the sky, maybe from the next second, and she looks for the nearest hiding place. The machines can come from anywhere, can burrow inside her or assemble themselves before her, and in their coldness, in their empty complexity, even when they are attacking, she can feel the life in them.

The dream goes on. More places, more sights he has already seen, even though he is only Ess, twenty-two cycles old only, a man-child, who has never known a war. He is she, he is the woman moving slowly through the ruins.

A middlewam is talking in an open place.

The middlewam is looking around at the ruins of Badil, the city of Badil that stood on the Anokin continent of Sha-Nal. The middlewam is there in front of the body that is Ess, the shell of Ess from long ago, this middlewam before Ess's eyes is saying, "We should not have awakened any of the machines if we were not willing to teach them how to live."

How does Ess know Badil? He has never been to the city, he has merely heard the name in the multitude of stories about Hanson. But here is the city around him and even with its ruins sending up girders of smoke he knows this place is Badil, his knowledge is recognition and not conjecture. Here is a place he has known before. Or is this simply the sensation of the memory, the experience he should have had in the memory-sharing? Is this simply an illusion caused by the test?

The middlewam is smiling. It has pulled the child out of the dirt. The sirens are fading. A circle of others have gathered, the people who are left here, costumed in rags and dust. Hanson speaks. It is a particle of Hanson, this middlewam. Ess hears the voice, one which could be man or woman, and the face, so near to Ess, so near in this vision or dream that Ess could reach a finger to the cheeks, looks like Magye. This middlewam has lost a hand and has no prosthetic for its stump. Hanson speaks the Law, and Ess listens, a stooped old woman, her feet swollen, throbbing with pain, her head a dull glaze of sound and motion, Ess an old woman beside the prophet Hanson.

But how does Ess know Hanson? The prophet must have spoken a name, must have said, "I am Hanson." When Ess the old woman walks away, looking backward, hesitating, she sees Hanson again, sees bloodied legs in ragged, torn pants, missing part of a foot and that still bleeding, looking for a moment into Ess's eyes across that clearing in the wake of the attack that has just ended.

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"What do you want?" Ess asks. "Why are you looking at me?"

"Do you want to come with me?" Hanson asks. "Do you want to come with me when I go to meet the angels?"

Ess wants to ask where, but the dream ends, and he opens his eyes and is awake and filled, through and through, with a sadness too deep to have learned in such a little space of time. The narrow cylinder that has encased him vanishes. Waiting under the gantry into which the probe is retracting, he listens to the low throbbing from the acres of building and machine around him. "Are you all right?" asks the probe, whose name Ess has forgotten.

"Yes. I'm finished?"

"The scan's all done. A technician is on the way to return you to your friends."

Ess is breathing, closes his eyes, smells something like ammonia, but finds no source. "How long before you know?" Ess asks.

"We already know," the probe answers. "The test was negative." His voice—the probe is definitely a male—shows no trace of sympathy. "We were able to obtain a pretty good tracing and we got a good map of two whole Gerbek cycles. But there's no match for yours in our data-mass."

He feels quite heavy in the kosh, Ess. He feels himself sinking. He has wasted so many days. "So quickly," Ess says.

"Getting the image takes all the time," the probe says in an offhand way. "Matching it to the database takes a few small parts of a second."

"I see."

"Cheer up," the probe says. "It's not as if your life depended on a match, right? Personally, I'd be glad to know I was a new soul, with no baggage whatsoever."

"You're probably right," Ess says.

"And now you have a soul tracing. Do you know how much this costs? If the temple weren't paying, you'd never afford one for yourself."

When the technician comes, a young woman neatly dressed in pale grays from head to toe, she makes pleasant chatter on the way down the long gangway leading to the administrative area, something about a stipple game that everybody is watching. Ess has never seen or played stipple, which requires a large open field and a lot of grass. On the public screen, a number of small figures are running about with sticks that send out glances of light. "Echeson won the first clutch," the technician says. "Were you for him or for Quarrel?"

He shakes his head.

"I'm for Quarrel," the technician goes on, "but I think Echeson is really good-looking." After a moment, perhaps remembering why he is here, she asks, in an offhand way, "How was the test?"

"It was fine. I had a good dream."

Elda, hardly meeting his eye, accompanies him back to the Nedai temple. They travel by low-train, flitter, and then by foot from the flitter station, the public corridors and gangways crowded with riders who have come to see the temple, or who work in the nearby Planetary Ministry ziggurat. In the huge open space beneath the Ministry façade, he and

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Elda stand for a moment looking up at the verdant hangs of flowering vine tumbling down from the gardens of the ziggurat, listening to the cascade of water over stone. Neither says a word, though Elda pats Ess gently on the hand after a while, and they walk across the north-facing plaza through the ring of Hansons, sculptures of particles of Hanson in every medium imaginable, from stone to clay to bronze to swirls of light that have hardly any substance at all. Hanson the middlewam, the most famous image of the prophet, stood aside Hanson the good father, aside Hanson the merchant, aside Hanson the redeemer, Hanson the good soldier, torn by the war, partial of body. Hanson the woman of science stares into space, motionless, beside Hanson the force of nature, which is a mobile, drifting in a current of air.

When he reaches his cubicle in the ministry hostel, a proximity box relays a message from the man in the ministry office, Arn Mbele. Ess is requested to remain posted to the hostel in the Nedai temple for the time being; it is hoped that Ess will delay his progress to the next city on his pilgrimage.

He goes in search of someone to explain. The test is over, Ess should be free to go. But Maester Elda has vanished, and in the public halls, in the resting rooms where temple celebrants are visiting the sentient machines, Ess finds no one he knows except Cooper, who has no visitors tonight, looking nondescript with his lifeboat parked in a corner of the south room.

"So you're back," Cooper says, before Ess makes a sound.

"Yes, I am. How did you see me coming?"

"I access the temple micros," Cooper says, a hint of humor in the voice. "Sometimes I can even get a little sneaky and access cameras I'm not supposed to have. A guy has to get around, best as he can."

"I understand. You don't mind my asking questions, do you?"

"This is old stuff to me," Cooper says.

"How does your voice work?"

"Part organic, part mechanical. Tucked out of the way in my lifeboat, with a little pickup that reproduces it for you over some speakers. Sound okay?"

"Sounds like we're on the link together."

"I guess that's pretty much what it sounds like to me, too. When I had my body, now, when it was alive, that was different, that was pretty much like the real thing."

"What do you mean?"

"Sometimes when they adapt you, you're completely removed from the body for good. But most of the time you don't have to go that far, see. Sometimes they remove part of the brain and link the two parts, the one that's in the body and the one that's in the machine. In the machine's lifeboat, I mean. Sometimes they clone a brain from the original, put the clone in the machine and link the two together that way. The point is, you don't have to give up your whole life to Hanson, not unless you have a calling for that. You can live in your body till it wears out, then you can live with an avatar till you get tired of that. Then you're like me, just a brain in a box waiting to die." He chuckles.

"You said it was almost the real thing. When your body was alive."

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"Right. You're divided, I mean. When you're in the body, you're not all in there. Do you understand what I'm saying? You have this machine in your head, one that's part of you and that you guide while it works. That's your job, that's what you do. The machine's alive and it shares your life. If the machine's smarter than you, like mine was, it makes you smarter, too. I had a good life in my body down here on Senal, right? And at the same time, I was this consciousness for a switching system in orbit, in space. In *space,* man! You have this machine in your head, but life goes on like normal; you can walk down the street like a regular joe, or you can shut down from all that and be in space, doing your job, and looking at the stars." He makes that laugh again, a devilish sound, something alive in it. "I could tell the weather just by looking down at the planet, when I was in sync. I was right as often as the weatherbot, too."

"You make it sound like fun."

"Why would I lie?" For a moment the avatar flickers to solidity in front of Ess, younger than before, some kind of system echo, maybe. Thick, shaggy eyebrows in a stolid, jaw-heavy face. "Who wants to live a one-body life? Who wants to be completely organic? The way is to go both ways, like Hanson teaches. The body makes the consciousness, the consciousness makes the machine, the machine sustains the body. One Law."

"Thanks, Cooper. You're as good as a teacher."

"Maybe I'll be a middlewam in my next life. They have it pretty easy, looks to me." A pause follows that Ess can hear, one in which he can feel Cooper present. "Why all these questions?"

"Just talk. I need to get my mind off things." He sighs. "And the tests were negative. The special ones I told you about."

"I remember. Negative?" Cooper makes a sound exactly like a skeptical huff. "Listen, Ess. It's all hokum anyway. Nobody knows whether Gerbek cells house the soul in the first place, *if* we even have one."

"The Mage says so."

"Well, then. If we have her word for it."

"No, really, Cooper. It could be true."

"Well, even if it *is* true, there's no way they could know anything this soon. You have to do a lot of modeling on the Gerbek images to get them to mean anything. It takes days. I read about it, I know what I'm talking about."

"The probe said the test was negative. He told me right away."

"He had to have meant the quick-match. They count the rings and run the raw image through the database. But to get a real match, they'll have to set up data from your tracing as a model and let it run for a while, and they'll have to do the same thing with any tracing they want to compare. That takes time, my friend."

Can that be why the ministry wants me to stay here for a few more days? Ess wonders, wants to ask, but decides he has bothered Cooper enough. "How long should it take?"

"Shalahar knows," Cooper says. "Depends on the size of database."

They talk for a while longer, till the visiting period nears an end. Ess says good night, Cooper's avatar flickers again, saluting informally. "Think about what I said, you hear? Stop worrying."

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Ess walks a distance, turns again. "How old are you?"

A grunt, distinct, from the back of the box. A rude sound. "I stopped thinking about my age a long time ago. Never ask a machine his age, young fellow!"

Ess laughs. "Good night, Cooper."

He wishes he could call home, call his mother, ask her to tell the Matriarch, to tell the whole pod; could anyone ever have imagined such a possibility might exist? That he, Ess, might be a soul from Hanson's time? Or *is* that what he wants to call for? Maybe he wants to hear his mother's voice, to see her face on the flat, even just that much contact. Or even to call his father, to talk to him? He has a lonely, heavy feeling in his insides, and goes so far as to link to an exchange and get a price for a call to his home pod, only to learn that such a thing isn't even practical or possible. The best he could hope for is a taped message that could travel out the sixty-odd hours that is the current lightspeed separation between Senal and his home. He can send a message and get an answer in a few days, but what would he send, what would he say? He can hardly afford the bandwidth-boost for a voice message, not even a picture.

When I have shed my body, or when I am inside the mind of my body and the mind of the machine to which I am assigned, I hope I will still have moments like this, moments when all I am is wrung through with feelings, when the only proper use of the kosh is to sit inside it, surrounded by the surface of the present moment. When I have shed my body partially, I hope I can still feel totally inside it. He sits in his cubicle with the flat displaying the current day's calendar, he sits there thinking these sentences, in whole or in parts, until he is tired and sleeps.

Do you have to breathe so much? A face bends over him, asking this question. *You breathe all the time. Over and over again. Do you have to?* The face hovering in a fog, out of sight, then bending so close the details refuse to resolve, moving back and forth. The dream wraps through his sleeping consciousness like a thread, insistent. *We'll never be able to pay the bill for the oxygen. Do you have to breathe so much?*

Magye hides from him, that is the only explanation. For two days, he sees neither Elda nor Magye, nor can anyone else tell him anything. Ess speaks to the middlewam in Elda's protocol office, speaks to the personal bot of the minister, then to a life functionary, who tells him politely that Arn Mbele is at a conference. Ess has no idea what a conference is, but has a feeling it would be better not to ask.

His hundred days are leaking away, one by one.

Bored, he explores Nedai, and learns that in a city of fifty million one can find nearly anything. He goes off-line, finds a gathering place, a bar and console room with a dance floor at the bottom of a special-effects well; what comes to the bar are young men, about Ess's age, about the same build as Magye, each of them slim and erect, each perfect in his own way. Ess drinks liquids and inhales from vials, feels each of his nerve endings unfurled, dances for two days running, hopped up on enzymes and additives that his link entirely approves, that are, in fact, enhanced by the

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link to a kind of bliss, as if his interface understands a need that Ess himself only senses. He dances and drinks, takes liquid food to keep himself going, buys a bath and a change of clothes on the premises, spends more money than he can believe, and in the two days has sex with Ungol, with Barth, with Graham, and several times with Wise. So much surprises Ess in all this, especially that he can suspend himself so freely. At home on Odo, he experimented with sex of all kinds, freely, but now, for the moment, finds himself drawn entirely to this kind.

He comes back to the temple trembling, not entirely willing, answering an insistent page transferred to him over the link, a tracking message that has taken a while to worm its way through humanity to find him.

He hopes to reach his cubicle, to retreat into the shower-share, to emerge clean and tingling in fresh clothes, before finding Magye in the cloister. But when he tries to cross the plaza, one of the middlewam attendants goes running for Magye, who comes hurrying out of the sanctuary to catch him at the statue of Hanson the Angel of Metal. Daylight from the artificial sky casts a slanting shadow across Ess, and across Magye as he—as it—approaches.

"You've been away."

"I was dancing," Ess says. For the first time, he is seeing that Magye might have been a man. He is becoming quite confused, a sick feeling in his stomach, one for which the link will compensate, if it is functioning properly and he wishes it. "I stayed away to dance. At home, with my friends, it would always clear my head."

"For two days?"

"Why not?"

"I was young and never danced for two days."

That's because you're a middlewam, Ess wants to say, but holds it back at the last second, and Magye glances at him.

In the cool of the glance, in a moment's transformation, the "he" and "she" of Magye are replaced by something completely neutral. It, Magye, is uncomfortable. In fact, it is hardly thinking about Ess, himself, at all. It is feeling some surprise of its own. "Mother Elda had a message. Someone would like you to make a trip, to visit." Its face is trembling with emotion. "You're invited to the Core. I've never been there myself!"

"But I'm supposed to go to Gondor next."

Magye shakes its head. "The Core, Ess. Shalahar has invited you." A slow tear runs down its face. "You have to go."

"Why? The match was negative, there was no match."

It shakes its head. "It doesn't matter. You've been invited." For a moment, it trembles with passion, and its voice becomes vehement. "Do you know what I would give for an invitation to see Hanson?"

The knowledge is beginning to sink in, now. "Yes," he says.

"Then you'll accept?"

"I don't know."

"You'll come and see Mother Elda?"

"When would we be leaving?"

"You're going alone. The invitation is for *you*."

A thrill up his spine. "When would I be leaving, then?"

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"As soon as you like."

He talks to Elda and to her peers in the church, along with a pair of spheres who are at rest a few inches above the floor, one a representative from the Distributed Data Core Systems Section of the Information Division of the Unified Ministry Council, the other linked to Arn Mbele in his office, or to one of his distributed processes. During the beginning conversation, while Elda is giving the particulars of the invitation, Ess is wondering what would happen if he were to insist that Magye come with him. He finds he has grown calm, at some point, that he has come to some understanding of his circumstances, of his true kosh. Elda is saying, as if she has read his mind, "We can send someone from this temple with you, if you would like. Since you're alone on Senal. If you wish to have company."

The moment slows for him, and he pivots on the point of the choice, which has been made so easy. He hears Cooper's voice, *It's wrongheaded to like a middlewam that way, it won't like you back.* Ess's own feelings of innocent liking toward Magye have grown mostly cold. In inviting Magye he would be taking advantage of an emotion the middlewam has revealed to him. But without inviting Magye, he will lose a thread of the story, he will not know how it ends. So he says, "I'd like for Magye to come." Feeling a moment of malicious thrill.

"You don't have feelings for Magye, do you, young man?" Elda asks, looking piercingly into him.

"I did for a while. But not now."

"Are you sure?"

"Pardon, elder, but I'm young and this was a new place. I understand better now."

Elda studies him for a while. Something grand in the way it looks him over, with its hooked nose and sharp, pointed chin. It says, "I believe maybe you do."

A voice from the sphere from Arn Mbele's office. "I need a voice print of your formal acceptance of the invitation and your waiver of any appeal to your rights of passage." Referring to the terms and conditions of his pilgrimage. "In essence, this becomes your coming of age."

"Do you think I'll spend the rest of my hundred days there?" Ess asks.

"It is possible. At any rate, when your visit to Shalahar is over, you should contact the local ministry, if you need assistance. Someone at Core will help you, I'll forward your case to our office in Elkar."

"Is it likely I'll find a pairing? Or even a job?"

Hesitation comes clearly through the sphere, even without the man's full consciousness to drive the process. "It is as likely as anywhere. It is never very likely, you know. Most pilgrims return off-world."

"Perhaps he will be lucky," says the other sphere, the one from the Core, speaking for the first time. "We'll take good care of him."

So Ess gives the voice print as Arn Mbele wishes, states clearly into the sphere, "I accept the invitation to visit Shalahar and understand there are to be no changes in the pilgrimage; I make this choice in the free kosh." Arn Mbele makes an approving sound at the use of the last phrase.

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Magye is full of apologies for its earlier behavior, after the news that Ess has asked for its company on the trip to Shalahar. The middlewam appears at the tube station in street clothes, a neut-suit with dark leggings and zero-shoes like the ones Echeson the stipple-player wears in all the ads. The shoes appear very stylish, molded to Magye's long, slim feet. Now it looks like all the other middlewams on the way to the office, standing on the platform of the tube.

They travel to Elkar, a city across the continent, where one of the principal nodes of Shalahar is housed. The Core, despite its name, exists in many places, distributed over Senal. The tube train is closed and runs underground, but a long screen runs the length of each side of the compartment, and onto this is projected a running image of the open countryside, borrowed from public cameras, no doubt, so that it appears that the train is running in the open, suspended just above the rooftop gardens of Nedai. The sensation of speed flows over Ess, easier to bear than the earlier trip.

Magye is still embarrassed at the invitation, and, on the train, asks a few awkward questions about his childhood. "You grew up in the family with mother and father?"

"We had quarters together. My dad and mom slept in the same bed most of the time. Later on, they separated."

"Fascinating."

"Not really, not most of the time. They were a pretty boring couple."

"But the whole idea."

"Families are really common on a lot of ring stations."

"I suppose they're actually quite common here, too," Magye says. "But the idea strikes me as very strange."

"You grew up in a temple, or something?"

It shakes its head. "In a common nest. I had middlewam guides but no parents. We all shared each other, really. It was nice. But I wonder what I missed, not growing up with more connections to particular people."

"There are so many ways to live, here," Ess says. "But none of us gets a choice about how we arrive."

Magye nods agreement, but still seems troubled. "I suppose I envy the way you were conceived."

"Why?"

"You're truly alive, you truly have a soul. I'm a randomization. There weren't two people there when I was made."

Ess studies the middlewam's face. He has come to understand that the genders that shimmer over it are projections of his own perception. "Why would that be less alive?"

"What if it means I'm more like a machine than a person?"

"What if there really isn't any difference?" Ess counters. "Cooper, from the temple, says nobody knows whether a soul tracing is any more than nonsense."

"There are a lot of arguments. Some say Gerbek proved the soul exists and how it works, and some say she didn't."

"It's what Hanson said that matters," Ess says, looking at Magye. "To survive, we have to be *both*. Soul and machine."

"That's true," Magye answers, smiling.

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"So why am I really here?" he asks.

"I suppose because Hanson believes Gerbek was right," Magye says. But there's more than it's saying. It punches the flat for a sandwich. The train has emerged into the open air, and the side panels become transparent. They are cruising over a large, complex city, passing over and under buildings, though the train itself runs far above ground level on a track Ess can't see. Magye speaks quietly, but with force. "Hanson remembers you."

"I don't understand what you mean. Hanson died a long time ago."

It shakes its head. "Most of the Core is Hanson. Every piece of him or her or it that we can find."

"But you can't keep people alive that long. Nobody can."

"You can keep a multiple alive as long as it wants to stay alive," Magye says. "As long as it can replace its parts. The group consciousness has to learn to sustain the group memories in the first place, or the group never becomes conscious. The memories already survive the death of any one of the parts. The original Hanson, whoever it was, might have been dead a long time before its particles began to speak the prophecy. Hanson is still here, in the Core. Not just here, but in all the places where the Core processors are clustered." It's blushing now. "That's why you were invited. To speak to the Core. To be given a choice."

Every piece of him or her or it that we can find. "You want me to join Hanson." He stops.

It's trembling. The train is sliding into a station.

Ess says, "Cooper tells me it's not a bad life, to be interfaced with a machine."

"There's no interface," she says. "The conversion is complete. Though we middlewams do sustain your body through its natural life, in honor of your service."

That city over which the train traversed was West Elkar; the stop of the train in East Elkar brought the travelers close to the Western Way, the enormous complex of buildings, delvings, and floating towers that are the main residence of the Mage, who, it is said, despises Beyoton and its imperial ministries. Neither Magye nor Ess has traveled here before, but their personal link to the data mass—to this very Core that is their destination—supplies them with names and information. Ess finds the process to be disconcerting, since his interface on Pod Odo was never so helpful; but for Magye, this internal stream of text is second nature. The Western Way is surrounded by temples of all kinds, and the entrance to the Core is through the Grand Basilica of the Home Star, shared by many sects, including the Cult of the One Law of Hanson, to which Ess and Magye belong. Ess and Magye are overawed by the grand boulevard leading from the train stop to the temple district and then along the many temples to the Grand Basilica. On the lintels of the soaring stone façade, Ess reads the words, "Promise Pilgrims Ending Peace." The inscription is in the public style of the Hormling language, in which key words represent a well-known phrase, in this case, one of the sayings of Hanson, "Promise the pilgrims the war is ending and they will have peace." These

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were the first words Hanson spoke after the apotheosis, when all the particles of Hanson went down to the core of the machine and ended the war, or part of it. Ess reads the words as Magye waits patiently.

Their arrival has been transmitted to the Grand Basilica already, and directions are streaming through Ess's interface. A sphere is on the way to meet them, emerging through the crowd on a journeyman pad, introducing itself as a projection of the representative of Distributed Data Core Systems Section whom Ess met before in Elda's office. "Welcome," says the sphere, its voice very soothing and full. "We'll take you into the VIP section right away. Could you introduce me to your friend?"

"Oh, I'm sorry," Ess says, "this is Magye, from the Nedai temple."

"So pleased," says the sphere. "May your markets all expand. If you'd follow me this way."

In the basilica interior, he is struck with awe at the harmony that the building embodies, at the same time that it humbles him with its inhuman scale and aura of authority. Thousands of people are visiting the interior, Hormling of all kinds, every one of them legally human, but each so different from the others. Some are multiples, moving in congress with one another, dressed in their robes of honor; many are middlewams, costumed in the trappings of the dozens of cults that are focused here; many are partly mechanical; there are a number of spheres like the one Ess and Magye are following, as well as avatars of all types, including some that are very exotic, like the small golden dragon near the center of the room. All of these people have gathered in a vault that soars above them hundreds of measures, flooded with light from windows of colored glass. The sanctuary is lined with benches of real wood, the most wood Ess has ever seen in one place, a commodity of extraordinary value. He and Magye pass through the main sanctuary, following the sphere down one of the side colonnades, passing through a garden open to the sky.

He finds the daylight sky to be hypnotic, such an alien presence, so deep and vast and full of light. This is the real sky, his body can feel the difference, that it continues as far as he can see. They move through the garden and Ess is watching only the sky, sees nothing of the verdant plantings until he passes through a grove of flowering trees, dogwoods, descendants of those brought here on the colony ship from Earth, according to the information passed him by the link.

At last, they enter a small, graceful building of stone, its interior larger, lighter, and more spacious than Ess anticipates, where a number of people are gathered, apparently for the sole purpose of gazing at Ess with mild expressions of surprise and welcome. Magye draws close to Ess, and he sees with a flood of warm feeling that Magye is afraid, in this crowd. A middlewam in Temple robes comes forward to greet Ess, separating him from Magye and leading him to a room at the rear of the receiving hall. He turns to watch Magye, who looks lost, listening to whatever its fellow templar is saying into its ear. It hears something and gives Ess a look of alarm, but by then the room has already begun to fade, hands have already moved in place to catch him, and he is in mid fall before he loses sight of Magye altogether.

From the other side of the moment, it is not as if he loses consciousness,

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but as if the walls of the world shimmer and fall away, as if he is transported in that slow moment out of the Core and into the ruined city of the memory or the dream. Around him is Badil. He is himself, in his own body, and yet he can feel that other day around him, the ghost of that old woman as she shuffles after Hanson, following Hanson. He looks along the rutted, cracked pavement, to the place where the child should be lying, half buried in dust that is still settling—though that detail is from the memory, not from the present—over her skin. No girl corpse lies at his feet, no dust of bombs drifts down from the air. Here is the ruined city, but it is empty, still, a vast, sprawling, silent place where nothing moves except him—or so he thinks at first.

He is at the foot of a wrecked, gutted ziggurat, a ministry complex, with the building blasted to dust and its foundations and deepest guts full of debris. Many dead souls came out of that place, unhooked from their organic costumes, drifting into the lifespace to be recycled into new breathings. This is what Hanson teaches as the cycle of the soul's breathing, life to death to life, states that are not separate in the least. He picks his way among the wreckage, most of it beyond recognition as belonging to any civilized world at all.

Ahead, framed in eerie twists of fallen metal, a figure waits for him, alone.

Ess's heart pounds, reassuring him of the reality of his own body, at least. He has the feeling he knows what is about to happen, that he knows who this is already.

The face of the middlewam standing under the canopy of wrecked girders is empty and cool of emotion. Ess finds himself by instinct expecting welcome, but from this figure he feels nothing at all. The middlewam looks Ess up and down. "You are she," says it, in a voice that makes Ess shiver, deep and vibrant.

Ess bows his head.

"You know who I am?" it asks.

"You're part of Hanson."

"I am all of Hanson," it says. "We should begin our walk."

"Where are we going?"

Hanson moves from beneath the shattered building, and Ess follows. They walk a distance, across upturned and tilted gouges of stone that might have been a plaza, stopping near a block of granite that held a sculpture's corpse at a crazy downward angle over a deep crater that led to lower levels of the city. Hanson stops at the edge of the crater and gestures for Ess to study the wreckage. There is something numbing, for Ess, in the vastness of the ruined crater, the depth of it, the layers of the dead city that are exposed. Layer upon layer, the city recedes downward into a pile of dust and wreckage that obscures whatever lies beyond. As for its breadth, the crater stretches nearly to the horizon, its far wall too distant to see in detail.

"If you go to Badil, you will see part of this in the sunlight-world," says Hanson. "This part of the city was never rebuilt. This is where I began my descent. Into the deepest parts of Badil to find the angels of metal. That's what the story says, isn't it?"

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"Yes. Is it true?"

The middlewam has eyes of the lightest green, a green like ice, chilling, and its skin is coffee-colored, a burnished color, tones of fire. It wears a simple wrap of dark fabric around its slender bones. "Yes. What else would I say?"

He looks at the middlewam again, and asks again, "But is it really true?"

Hanson smiles, nods its head slowly. "The angels were the commanders of the metal army. I went down into the service levels to find them. All of me. My parts were mostly here, in Badil, but there were a few in Nedai, who tried the same journey there. They were killed by our own people." No trace of emotion while it speaks, neither malice nor affection, neither sorrow nor loss. "So I was wounded already, and many of my parts here were wounded. I climbed down there, you can see the kind of path, along the roofs on each level and climbing down the rubble to go from level to level. Nobody tried to stop me here. The metal armies had broken through all the way to the surface. Nearly everyone was dead."

"Are you really Hanson?" Ess asks.

The voice comes close to convincing him. "Yes. I have no reason to pretend." It is studying its feet, bare and whole, perfectly clean, even in the dust. "You're probably finding me to be devoid of emotion, and you mistrust that. Many of the converts have this reaction. I'm not what they expect. I'm not God."

"What do you want from me?" Ess asks.

"Are you ready to hear so soon?" Hanson asks.

Ess looks over the chasm of the dead city, feels the memory stirring, whether real or conjured by his wish. "Yes."

"You were here. You were one of the ones who followed, the ones who were not my particles."

Ess masks his wish to believe, his thrill at hearing what he wants so near to coming true. His heartbeat is astounding, Hanson must hear it. "Are you sure?"

"There are too many of me, and too many of my followers, for that to be a true consideration in this case. I'm as sure as I need to be, because I feel you from that time, and for me, old as I am, that's enough. What the machines and tracings say merely makes this feeling more credible, but for me that is not to be included in the equation." The graceful head turns back to the wreckage, the eternal landscape. "In other words, yes, I am certain, and you may believe me, for I am speaking as the Prophet." Hanson moves forward, to where chunks of flooring have settled into a slope leading downward into the crater. "So, will you come with me again?"

"To where?"

"To the angels of metal. To begin your conversion."

Ess feels a wave of nausea, kneels to the ground, breaking into a sweat so physical it makes him doubt the rest of the vista around him more deeply than ever. Hanson stands beside him and patiently watches. "Now?"

"Now, of course. Either believe me, and choose to keep me company here, or don't, and go away."

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"Can't you tell me anything more?"

"What? That I offer you a world you could not dream of obtaining any other way? A life in worlds real and unreal, with access to all the resources of your people? Honor for your corpus while it lives, and children if you want your code to continue?" Hanson is kneeling too, and looks at Ess with an expression that is only weary and old, not at all divine. "You can learn all that. The choice comes first, because it reveals your faith."

His heart is swelling to burst. "I'd like to be able to say good-bye to Magye."

"Why?" Hanson asks. "Let the middlewam tend your corpus, ask it for that service when you see it again. We'll take a while to get down to the level of the angels, of course, but outside hardly any time will pass at all."

He is standing, looking at the sky, oddly colored in the setting sun as the light diffracts through the cloud of dust in the upper atmosphere. "Yes," he says, feeling the tug of the voice from inside, the memory of the old woman in the ruin, who had stood watching Hanson so fervently. "I'll come."

"You are she." Hanson bows its head. Its placid surface has ripples of feeling across it now. "You were one of my heroes, you see. You ones who followed that day without question. If we had not given our bodies to the angels, on faith, the war might never have ended."

So the middlewam begins to walk along the rubble and Ess follows. He will grow hungry soon, and will learn that the link offers no help. The walk will tire him, but Hanson will continue steadily for measures and measures of time, descending each level patiently; and Ess will follow, growing more exhausted with each step, but he will not relent. He will be, for that interval, the perfect pilgrim, walking on the strength of his choice, believing this is his destiny. Later, at the end of the journey, instead of the angels of metal, he will find more middlewams, more templars, who will explain to him that this initial journey is a test, nothing more, and that he may think and choose again. But by that time it will be too late for Ess, who will stand in that clearing and tell them his choice without hesitation, looking into Magye's devoted eyes. In Ess the conversion has already begun on this walk, where he will follow the footsteps that lead to God. O

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FREEFALL

Michael Bateman

Michael Bateman lives with his wife in the mountains of Colorado where he works as a ski and mountain bike patroller. The author is a 1998 graduate of Clarion. "Freefall" is his first professional sale.

Jupiter," Cal announced, throwing the door closed behind him. He looked like a boy standing there, hair wild, face flushed and eager. He must have run to get here.

I had just come out of the darkroom and was washing my hands at the kitchen sink. Out of context, the word meant nothing to me; he might as well have come through the door saying "Eggplant" or "Tolstoy." I smiled at him, waiting for the rest of whatever game this was, and then his meaning hit me, and my heart froze. "What about it?" I replied, keeping my voice level.

"The next jump. What d'you think?" His eyes were like chips of blue glass—hard, intense—and I knew my arguments wouldn't make a difference. He had already decided.

"I thought you were done jumping," I said.

He started pacing back and forth across the living room. Light from the picture window painted his hair gold every time he passed in front of it. "Zero-G left a message with Michio saying they needed a big stunt for a new advertising campaign. All the usual terms apply, plus we'll retain rights to all the images they don't use. There's a lot of money involved, Leigh."

I walked past him into the living room to give myself a moment to breathe and looked out over the city, its soaring towers shining like needles in the midday sun. I had long since lost my ability to look at Cal when he was like this. "What about Sam? Have you forgotten? Or do you think it can't happen to you?"

"Of course I think about Sam, but I'm not going to let his death haunt me like it does Anne. This is a good opportunity."

"We don't need the money."

"I didn't mean . . . listen, this is the last big jump. Saturn's already been done. And Neptune. This'll be the last time, I promise. After this one, I can really retire. For good. I'll have made my mark."

"Cal, you're almost fifty years old. You have twenty-three first jumps. You've made your mark. Let someone else have their chance."

"Zero-G doesn't *want* anybody else. I can still do this." He turned suddenly from his pacing and reached for my hands. "We've been dreaming about Jupiter for years, and now they're giving me a chance to do it."

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"You don't have a choice then, do you?" I said, and smiled.

That afternoon, I met Annie for a late lunch. Her husband Sam had started jumping with Cal back at the beginning, when they would tie their climbing ropes to the Royal Gorge bridge and launch themselves into the void. They made sure everyone knew this wasn't bungee jumping; it was freefalling. Unlike a bungee, which could stretch up to several times its length, climbing rope was designed to stretch only enough to absorb the force of the climber's fall, about 50 percent of its length, but that was it. This, they explained, made freefalling much more physically demanding and technical than bungee jumping, especially as the height of the fall increased and elaborate anchor systems had to be employed to take up some of the force. It also made it much more dangerous.

Sam had died two years ago in the first attempt on Jupiter. Radiation had interfered with the piezoelectrics of his smartrope and the rope had failed.

We met at Jacob's Aerie, our favorite café. Extending out from the west façade of the First District tower, the Aerie commanded an awesome view of the Front Range. We arrived between the lunch and dinner rushes, and so were able to get a window table. Backlit by the setting sun, a rainstorm slid over the foothills, a shifting veil of rose and gold.

"I'm afraid, Annie," I said, after the waiter had taken our order. "I really thought I had convinced him to quit. I don't know what I'll do if . . . I don't want to be alone."

Annie reached across the table and touched my hand. "Leigh, honey, men like Cal weren't meant for retirement. It's like being in prison for them. Sam was the same way. Every time he went for a new jump, I was afraid he wouldn't come back. And then one day, he didn't. I thought I was prepared for it, you know? But nothing can prepare you for that. It took a couple of years before I realized that that was the way he had wanted it, to die doing what he loved to do."

"You know what the worst part is?" I asked. Annie shook her head. "That I'm not enough for him. I've always thought that if I was better, maybe he would stop. But he's looking for something I can't give him."

"What do you think it is?"

This was the essential question I had been struggling with for years: why did he do it? I knew he had to, there was no doubt in my mind about that, but what I still didn't understand, even after all this time, was what drove him. Annie waited for my answer, absently twisting her wedding ring around her finger.

"I don't know," I finally said. "At first, I thought it was the rush. Now, I don't know."

"I think they do it for different reasons. Sam did it because he was afraid."

"Afraid? Of what?"

"I don't know. I don't even think he knew. But every time he jumped, he had to face his fear and conquer it. I think it made him feel strong, competent. Showed him there was nothing to be afraid of." She smiled at the irony.

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The waiter brought our food, and we ate in silence for a few minutes. My mind kept going in circles. Cal had said he was done. He had promised. And now he was going to jump again. Didn't he know what he was doing to me? Finally, I set my fork down on my plate and glanced out the window. "I don't want to do this anymore."

"It's difficult, I know. Some days you love 'em so much you don't even think about the sacrifices. Other days, you wonder what you did to deserve such a shitty life. It makes you crazy."

"I feel like I've put my life on hold for him, and he doesn't even notice. He's so preoccupied with jumping. Even when he was retired, he kept talking about it."

Annie set her fork down on the edge of her plate and wiped her mouth with her napkin. "Maybe it's time for you to renegotiate your marriage contract, amend a dissatisfaction clause."

"We opted for a traditional certificate. We thought that a contract marriage would be hypocritical considering the vows we were about to take."

"You need to tell him, then. Make sure he knows that you're unhappy and that you need him to help you."

"I would; I *have*. It's not easy, though. He doesn't think there's anything wrong. He just accuses me of not being supportive."

"Hmm." She picked up her glass and set it back down without drinking. "I can't tell you what to do, Leigh. But I want you to promise me one thing, that you're going to start taking care of yourself, you understand? You're running on empty right now, and one of these days, your engine's going to quit. You hear what I'm saying?"

More than the tone of her voice, the look on her face said she was serious, and I knew that she wasn't going to let me leave until I had promised to do as she said. I inhaled deeply, not quite sure what, exactly, this would entail or how I would go about doing it, then said, "Okay."

We left for Jupiter a month after Cal's announcement. Zero-G had arranged for us to take a suborbital up to the Lagrange 5 space station, and from there, after a brief layover, an outer system shuttle on to Jupiter.

Michio was waiting for us on the concourse at L5 Station, a dark figure among the bright lights and chrome fixtures, like a shadow, or an oil slick. As we approached, he straightened from the silver pillar he had been leaning against, and smiled too enthusiastically, uneven teeth and the wrinkles spreading out from the corners of his mouth and eyes ruining the continuity of his otherwise smooth, oval face.

"Here comes the money," he said, reaching for Cal's hand. As they shook, Michio appraised the both of us. "Look at you guys. You both look great." He released Cal's hand and, touching my shoulder, leaned in for a kiss.

"It's good to see you, Michio," I lied, pulling away.

"Leigh wasn't going to come," Cal said, "but I told her you'd be flying out with us, and she changed her mind."

Another lie. Cal knew how I felt about his agent, and he was always

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trying to smooth things out between us. But Michio wasn't stupid. He knew where things stood, but he was either too gracious or too sly to let personal relationships interfere with business.

"We're lucky, then, to have her with us," Michio replied. He gestured for my carry-on, but I declined with a wave. "The trip would have been interminable otherwise," he said.

Michio installed us in our room, a spacious rim suite, with overstuffed furniture, a floor-to-ceiling view screen, and a sleeping gravity slightly less than Earth normal.

Despite how I felt about it, I had never made a habit of complaining to Cal about the jumps. The sport was dangerous enough; he didn't need me distracting him with my own doubts and fears. But I couldn't get Annie's advice out of my head. I had wanted to confront him earlier, but years of practiced silence were not so easy to overcome. This was the end of the line, though. We were only going to be on the station for one night, so if I was going to say anything, I had to say it now.

"Nice place," Cal said, tossing his overnight bag on the couch. "Zero-G's taking care of us."

"I don't want you to do it," I replied, trying to keep the tremor out of my voice.

"I've signed the contract."

"They'll find someone else. They can't *make* you do it."

"But I want to." He crossed the room and stood before the view screen. Earth hung against an empty, black background, heavy and brindled with clouds. A big storm spiraled over the Indian Ocean, and several others dotted the South Pacific and the Sea of Japan. "You haven't liked this from the beginning."

"The odds are against us. We're not supposed to be here."

"Too many things had to come together to bring us here. It would be foolish to back down now."

"It would be foolish to go on for the sake of going on." I walked up next to him and put my head on his shoulder. "I'm afraid." He put his arm around me. "Sam . . ." My voice caught. I stood there for a while in his arms, collecting myself. "Don't let Sam's death be for nothing," I finally managed. "He would want you to learn from his tragedy."

"I've already squared things with Sam."

I raised my head and turned to look at him. "What do you mean?"

He chuckled, then sobered again. "I feel like if I don't do it, then he really will have died for nothing."

I returned my gaze to the view screen, not wanting him to see the tears that were forming again. The Earth had rotated out of view to be replaced by a thin sliver of moon, quickly thickening out of the screen's right hand edge and casting a cold light on the room. Nothing I could say was going to convince him not to jump. That much was clear. But instead of feeling resigned to his decision, I felt more desperate. I had run out of time, and I didn't know what else to do.

We made love later that night, and I couldn't keep the tears at bay any longer.

* * *

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Michio and Cal spent most of the journey to Jupiter patched into the *Fermat*'s VR system, discussing details of the jump, while I coordinated camera angles, exposure times, and film speeds with the various platform configurations and positions they sent me.

By the time we docked with Hawking Station, in orbit around Europa, Michio and Cal had already sent their instructions ahead to the support team there. Still, there were some details left to be nailed down, and we met with three of Zero-G's jump technicians the same afternoon we arrived.

The conference room on Hawking Station commanded a dramatic view. Jupiter's banded and storm-pocked face dominated the whole of the visible sky and cast an ocher glow across the smooth, ice-locked surface of Europa, rolling slowly beneath us.

Michio was describing the placement of the jump platform. ". . . a hundred kilometers above the atmosphere. We'll float it on a Kapton sail, which will allow us to reposition more easily for the swing than with verniers." He looked around the room. "Any questions?"

When no one spoke up, Michio said, "Okay, then, I'll let Cal talk about the anchor system."

Cal waited for Michio to take his seat before he stood. "We're going to use a modified Schneider cradle," he began. "There will be sixteen anchor points, each using a two-inch fireman's carabiner. The rope will be laced through the 'biners in the classic Schneider pattern with the exception of the four follow-through knots we're going to put at the first, fourth, eighth, and twelfth positions. The spindle will be a LePage Monitor, and we'll be using Zero-G's Spidersilk smartrope."

"Wait," I said, shocked out of my jet-lagged dullness. "That rope's been recalled."

"This is a modified version, actually," Michio said. "The piezoelectrics have been chemically mediated, which should . . ."

"You didn't tell me about this," I said to Cal, standing.

"I didn't think it would matter," he replied.

"It would have mattered to me." He stood looking at me from the end of the table. The room was utterly quiet; we might as well have been the only two in it. I looked down at Michio, whose posture said he couldn't wait for me to finish so the meeting could continue. "Christ," I said, pushing in my chair, and strode from the room.

I went to our suite and waited for Cal.

He arrived an hour later, an unreadable expression on his face. "What the hell was that?" he asked, closing the door behind him.

"Why didn't you tell me you were using that rope?"

"Since when have you cared which equipment I was using?"

"Sam died on that rope."

"What do you want me to do? I can't quit. And even if I could, I wouldn't."

"Sometimes I feel like I've already lost you, only it's worse, because I know that it still might happen. I can't live like this anymore."

"Neither can I." He turned toward the door, paused with his hand on the touchpad. "This isn't just about you, you know."

I thought about the implications of that for a long time after he left. If

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he couldn't live without jumping, and I couldn't live with it, then he would live without me. I wasn't sure if that was what I wanted, but I knew that that was what I had been saying.

I remembered the first time we met, at the base of Lone Eagle Spire in the Indian Peaks Wilderness, and Cal's passion, so compelling after the ambivalence I had seemed to attract, his playfulness. We had climbed that day, with the sun falling on our shoulders like warm breath and big lenticular clouds hovering over the Continental Divide like balloons, or starships waiting to take us away.

"Tell me about your interests," he had said to me once we had reached the top of the spire. "What excites you?"

And so I told him about chemical photography, about my idols, Mendelson, Fielder, Zwicky, and my dream to open my own gallery,

"And you?" I asked. "What are your dreams?"

"To go to Mars and climb."

"Anything else?"

"That's as far as I've gotten."

As if to underscore his words, the bright spark of a suborbital lifted off the distant plains and hurtled across the sky, away from Denver Interspace and Earth.

"We'll see what happens," he said, wistful. And then he reached over and took my hand in his.

It wasn't until after we were married that Cal decided he liked falling more than climbing. I guess I shouldn't have been surprised by this. People change. All we can hope for is that they change with us.

But, like Annie said, there are no guarantees.

The day of the jump arrived, and I went to meet Michio and Cal in the shuttle bay. I hadn't seen Cal in three days. He didn't like any negative influences around him during the final few days before a jump.

A group of about thirty people had gathered to see us off; they were clinging to brightly colored tethers and maintaining a respectful distance, as if they could sense Cal's tension. Unable to accompany us out to the orbital platform, they would watch the jump on video screens in the station's observation lounge.

"Are we ready?" I asked, reaching to take Cal's hand and forcing a smile, determined to conceal the dread that had been building since I'd last seen him.

He refused my peace offering. "We had trouble with a couple of the anchors and had to switch them out this morning; but yeah, we're ready."

"Cameras are mounted; suits are in the shuttle," Michio said. "Everything's heavily shielded and just about impossible to move in, so we'll wait until we're docked with the platform before we suit up. Let's go."

A brief cheer rose from the small crowd as we moved to board the shuttle, followed by cries of "Good luck!" and "God speed!"

During the short flight out to the platform, Cal and I sat apart and watched the storms churn through Jupiter's thick atmosphere. I wanted to go to him, to touch him and tell him I was sorry, but his stony silence kept me at bay.

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The platform appeared out of the void. It had descended from the station several hours earlier, radiant beneath its shiny, aluminized sail; but now it appeared as a black stigma on Jupiter's painted face, a dark thing that seemed to banish all light from itself.

"Cal, I . . ." I began, unable to contain myself any longer.

"I know," he said. "It's okay."

"No, listen," I said. I stood and crossed the cabin to sit next to him. "I've done a lot of thinking the last few days. I think I know why you're doing this now, and I want you to do it. But I can't live like this anymore. This has to be the last jump. For real. Promise me."

He considered that for a moment, then cracked a smile and, putting his hand on mine, replied, "All right, all right, no more jumps. I promise."

With a sonorous thump, the shuttle docked with the platform. "Okay, people. It's time," Michio said.

We stood and moved to the back of the cabin.

Feeling numb and listless, weighed down with fear despite Cal's concession, I allowed Michio and Cal to close my suit around me. Cal's jump suit was even more heavily shielded than Michio's or mine and was wrapped in an exoskeleton that would help support him against Jupiter's strong gravity. It looked like a piece of military hardware, malevolent and impersonal, and I shuddered as I helped Michio seal him inside it.

When we were done, Cal reached for his helmet.

"Wait," I said, staying his hand with mine, and then I leaned in and kissed him on the mouth. "Come back."

He smiled. "Of course."

I turned away then, pulling my helmet on quickly to hide my tears, and waited for the airlock to cycle. When we stepped out of the shuttle, the three jump techs were waiting for us near the center of the platform, lurid orange light limning them in fire.

Cal, staggering every few steps under the four gees we were experiencing at this distance from Jupiter, walked slowly toward the center of the platform like a man walking to the gallows. He stood at the edge of the hole he would drop through on his way to Jupiter's upper atmosphere, a hundred kilometers below, but didn't look down. I went to each of the cameras and checked to be sure they were loaded and functioning properly, then turned back to watch the techs prepare Cal for the jump.

The rope looped up through the hole from its cat's cradle of sixteen anchor points beneath the platform and was clipped to a short railing that guarded two sides of the hole. One of the jump techs unclipped the rope and began to feed it through a conduit that ran beneath the exoskeleton of Cal's suit. Once he had secured the rope, the tech gave Cal a thumbs-up signal. "Good luck," he said, his voice blurred with static.

Cal had followed the tech's movements as the man secured the rope, and now he checked the rope again, just to be sure. Apparently satisfied, he returned the tech's thumbs-up. He stepped to the edge of the hole and clasped his gloved hands in front of him. Inert, the suit looked empty. Cal's slow, regulated breathing whispered across the link, almost drowned beneath the radiation hiss despite the shielding.

Although I couldn't see through the mirrored visor, I knew that his eyes

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were closed. He was going through his prejump meditation. Not for the first time, I wondered what was going through his mind. Was he visualizing his fall, the banded clouds rushing up to meet him, the rapid, crushing deceleration, the wild swing and jolting rebound? Or was he, as Annie suggested, putting away his fear? I had never asked, and he had never offered. All I could do was guess.

Minutes passed. Nobody spoke. Then Cal dropped his hands to his sides and stepped through the hole.

Cheers from Michio and the support team crackled over the link. Beneath them, a sustained whoop. Cal, releasing some tension, enjoying himself. I let out a breath I didn't know I had been holding.

He seemed to fall slowly at first, but as he drifted further away from the platform, his velocity increased. Coils of rope peeled neatly off the spindle that held them at the center of the anchors. Cal fell with his arms and legs spread wide, like a spider lowering itself on a strand of web. As he got closer to Jupiter, he would pull his arms and legs in toward his body, and the suit's exoskeleton would lock down so that he wouldn't be torn apart at the transition; but for now, he fell like a spider, tiny and frail against the immense face of the planet.

Numbers began to scroll across the inside of my visor—status reports from different sections of the rope. The numbers didn't mean much to me, but the techs exchanged comments about everything looking good.

The platform shifted slightly, and I looked up. The sail was a thin smear across the stars. It had angled to move us perpendicular to Cal's trajectory. Above it and to the right, Io incandesced across the sky, its geysers and volcanoes spewing umbrella-shaped clouds of ejecta hundreds of kilometers into space.

I looked for Cal again. He had reached the top edge of Jupiter's atmosphere, and the front side of his suit had begun to glow, a bright spark, a star burning beneath the phosphine clouds.

"Shit," a voice said over the link.

"What? What's the matter?" Michio asked.

"I don't know yet," one of the techs said.

"The data coming from the rope doesn't look right," someone else said. "Something's interfering with the transmission."

I looked at the numbers, searching for the anomaly, willing it to straighten out. "*Do* something," I said.

I looked down through the hole. The rope had uncoiled to its full length and was stretched taut. This should have been the swing phase of the fall, where much of Cal's velocity would be shed as angular momentum. But something was wrong. The rope was frozen in place, a rigid beam stretched between us and the planet. Beneath it, the Great Red Spot crept through the ocher sea of clouds. The rope had failed, and I imagined Cal falling down the ruddy throat of the Spot, a tight knot of flesh and steel, diamond-hard beneath the weight of ten million atmospheres. A star's burned-out cinder, falling. Falling.

But as I stared down at the slowly turning clouds, I noticed that the rope was moving, slowly at first, and then with increasing speed, describing a long arc through the planet's upper atmosphere. And then coils of

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rope appeared out of the clouds, rising slowly into space, and a white ember, trailing behind.

"There he is," I shouted, pointing through the hole.

More complaints from the jump techs about scrambled data crackled in my helmet, followed by a soft and remarkably clear "Thank God!" from Michio.

The platform shuddered as the spool began to collect the rope. I held onto the railing, my legs suddenly weak. It was over. Cal was coming back to me, and it was over.

After a small but enthusiastic reception back at Hawking Station and a private celebration of our own in our suite that night, Cal and I boarded the in-bound liner *Osceola* for the return trip to Earth. Michio had left the previous afternoon on the *Fermat,* ostensibly to give us some time alone—his and Zero-G's gift to us, he explained—but I suspected there was another reason. The *Fermat*'s itinerary would put Michio on Earth three weeks before we arrived, and Michio could get a lot done in three weeks.

The return flight was leisurely and uncrowded. Cal and I spent the time easing back into each other and repairing some of the damage that had been done by his return to jumping.

Two days out from Earth, Michio called. He had scheduled a press conference for the afternoon of our arrival. I was suspicious, but Cal assured me that the publicity would be good for us and that after this, his contractual obligation to Zero-G was finished. I understood this to mean that he would retire, for good.

We arrived at the Brown Palace, a hotel in the heart of Denver's downtown that had been at the pinnacle of its popularity in the early years of the last century and was now enjoying a renaissance as a special-events venue, in a car Zero-G had sent to pick us up at the spaceport. It was the end of February, and piles of dirty snow bracketed the entryway.

Inside, a podium had been set up at the back of the rotunda, small and nearly lost beneath the baroque columns and arched balconies, and flanked on either side by oversized speakers. Zero-G posters and banners hung from the second and third floor balconies; behind the podium, poster-sized prints of the jump photos I had taken stood on easels arranged in a semicircle. Yellow light leaked through small, high windows and gave the place the look of an old photograph.

Michio and a woman wearing a black vest embroidered with the Zero-G logo met us at the door and took Cal over to the podium. It was clear that I would be sitting in the audience.

An assemblage of about fifty chairs had been arranged in rows in front of the podium. I found Annie near the back, one stylus perched behind her ear, another clamped between her teeth, as she worked a crossword puzzle on her palmtop. In the months since I had seen her last, she had cut and dyed her hair; and as I sat down beside her, I noticed that she was no longer wearing her wedding ring. "Hi, friend," I said.

"Leigh McCandless," she said, looking up. "Back from the great beyond and looking beautiful as ever. It's good to see you." She set aside her palmtop and leaned over for a hug.

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"I like the new look," I said, curious, but not wanting to ask directly.

"Thanks. You know, I wasn't going to, but I watched Cal's jump on TV, and something happened. It was like a tight knot in my chest came unraveled, and all of a sudden, I realized that I had mourned Sam long enough. It was time to move on. That night, I put the ring away. The next day, I cut my hair."

I didn't know what to say to this. Everything that came to mind sounded trite, inadequate. "I'm glad you're here," I finally managed.

"I heard about the press conference on the web and thought I should come, see what this important announcement is all about."

"Announcement?" I began, but was interrupted by the Zero-G representative's voice over the PA asking everyone to take their seats.

While Annie and I had talked, the rotunda had filled with people, mostly press and marketing representatives from various companies looking to offer Cal endorsements. I had a difficult time picking Cal out of the crowd, but as people began to sit, I caught a glimpse of him standing beneath a filigreed arch, talking with Michio. He looked nervous. All I could think was that he and Michio had decided to take advantage of the success of the Jupiter jump and announce his retirement now, while he was still commercially viable.

It took a few minutes, but everyone finally found a seat. People continued to talk among themselves until the woman from Zero-G regained the podium. "Welcome," she began. "Today, we celebrate the courage and determination of Cal McCandless, who, once again, has succeeded where no one else has, and the vision and ingenuity of the company that sent him to Jupiter to make history." Her voice was bright and melodious, her demeanor confident and professional.

"There was a lot at stake with this jump," she continued. "A man who was trying to reclaim the excitement and celebrity of a career he had left behind him, and a technology that, having failed once, had to prove itself worthy again. We both succeeded in spades, and we're here, now, to tell you that we're not through yet! There is yet another challenge that Cal McCandless and Zero-G are prepared to conquer. We have developed the technology, and Cal has agreed to be our athlete. Ladies and gentlemen, one year from today, we're going to the sun."

For a moment, I couldn't breathe. Something had hit me in the stomach. And then I heard a low moaning sound. It was several seconds before I realized it was coming from my own throat. I turned toward Annie. She was looking at me, her face grim. She put her hand on my arm and said, "I'm sorry, Leigh."

"I . . . I have to go," I said, standing.

Cal had taken the Zero-G woman's place at the podium. He was speaking into the microphone, but I couldn't make out what he was saying. He stopped when he saw me, and a look of regret fell across his face. I knew what he was thinking, what he would say if I gave him the chance. And I knew that I couldn't do it again.

I fled out into the cold.

Lone Eagle Spire stretched above me like a ladder into the unblem-

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ished sky. I slid my hand into a crack, made a fist, planted my foot on the smooth rock, and pulled myself up another twelve inches. The day was warm, the sun shining directly down on top of my head. A chalk bag and a small backpack were the only pieces of equipment I was climbing with. I had to dip my hands into the chalk bag frequently to keep them dry.

Annie had told me that I was being stupid, climbing without ropes. Maybe she was right. Maybe this time she didn't know what she was talking about.

The crack I was working extended nearly to the top of the spire, and now that I was able to get my feet into it, the climbing went quickly. Within a few minutes, I had pulled myself onto the top of the five-hundred-foot pillar of rock and sat down.

The eastern slope of the Continental Divide unfolded through shades of green and brown down to the distant plains. At the base of the foothills, the high-rise towers of Denver's downtown rose to meet the sky. Beyond them, a string of puffball clouds dotted the horizon.

I shrugged out of my backpack, set it down, and pulled out my water bottle. This was the first time I had come here since the divorce. I had planned to come several times, but each time had found a reason not to. I drank from the bottle, then leaned back and waited.

A distant roar split the silence. I sat up. There, beyond the verge of the foothills, a lonely spark rose out of the plains and streaked into the sky. I placed my palm down on the warm rock to steady myself and watched until the spark disappeared in the glare of the sun. ○

TO A PREHISTORIC HUNTSMAN DEAD FROM EXPOSURE

Unable to run, hide, or tough it out,
watching the storm come over the mountains
to kill you—minutes (an hour at the most)
shy of the millennia you would spend
pressed between the earth and the ice, like a
butterfly preserved between the pages
of some rough book—did you offer prayers
for succor, beseech the sky for pity,
or beg the storm itself for mercy? Or
did you simply shrug within your (quite
inadequate) grass raincoat and say, "Such
is life," or "Oh, well," or "Just my damn luck"?

—Steven Utley

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SUITABLE FOR THE ORIENT

Karen Traviss

Karen Traviss is a journalist from Hampshire, England. This is her second story for *Asimov's*. Her work has also appeared in *Realms of Fantasy* and *On Spec*. Eos will be releasing the books in her trilogy—*City of Pearl*, *Gethes*, and *A Gift from Time*—sometime next year.

In a place where there are no humans, one must strive to be human.
—Rabbi Hillel

I lost another patient this morning. The family took the body away, and I spent an hour trying to clean the surgery. Now I had a fiber cup of vodka and cold black coffee in my hand, and every time I raised it, I could smell the sulfur and strawberry odor of aliens on my fingers, even though I'd worn gloves and scrubbed my nails clean with a stiff brush until my cuticles bled. The minkies' body fluids were amazingly persistent.

I was drunk with Bob the maintenance man, as I often was on Friday nights, both of us crammed into his four-square-meter office so close to the generators that the vibration made the surface of my drink shiver if I put the cup on his desk. And I mean that I was drunk, not just that I was drinking, although that was obviously true as well.

Bob said that he saved his doctor jokes for me because I needed to see the lighter side of my calling. Fresh jokes were in short supply in an isolated colony ten light-years from home: we didn't meet many new people.

"So the guy asks who he is, and St Peter says, 'That's God playing doctor.'" Bob tapped my knee with a length of foam insulation tube. I was sitting on his locked tool cabinet. "Good one, eh, Doc?"

"Heard it. And it was a white coat, not green."

"You shouldn't let it get you down, Frank."

I must have been staring into mid-distance. "And what if this is the pinnacle of my career?"

"I meant the minkies. They just die, y'know."

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"Not the first time I've had an alien die on me," I said, and wished I had been caught feeling compassion instead of self-pity.

I drank with Bob because I wanted to. We were both mid-thirties and going nowhere. Stagnation was made more comfortable because someone on-base had worked out how to bypass the beer rations and acquire illicit alcohol. But they never thought of making a good mixer to go with it, so we settled for coffee and a touch of sweetener to pretend we were downing Black Russians.

"You could go back to Earth for a hospital job," Bob said.

"My training's already twenty-five years out of date before I step on the shuttle."

"Can't you retrain?"

"What's the point?"

I found out that I was good only for minor medicine when I pulled my file as a final year medical student. Someone had coded "SFTO" on the header. Medics were notorious for cryptic codes on files. It was a long time before I found out what SFTO meant, but I did, and it meant SUITABLE FOR THE ORIENT. It was an old, old saying from the days of the British Empire, when the colonial civil service sent barely competent doctors to Asia and India—the orient—because it didn't matter if they killed the natives. The really good doctors attended white men.

So I was suitable for an orient that was a colony and support base on Hera, a month's subjective-time flight from earth but actually ten years distant. No one cared if I couldn't save aliens and it wasn't my job to try too hard.

The minkies turned up at my infirmary a couple of times a month, usually hemorrhaging from a puncture wound or laceration. Sometimes I got adults clutching a dehydrated infant. I would try to stop the hemorrhage manually, or get some distilled water into them. That was all I could do, apart from trying to remove their sickly odor. They accepted the deaths with a humming sound. Some people responded instinctively to the howls of distressed animals, but that mournful, resigned *mmmmmm* with its gradually falling note always stirred a shared misery in me.

I had known gifted colleagues who would have known intuitively how to save them, I was sure of that. But not me. And we were too busy trying to give the human colony a foothold to worry about the locals. The study of the minkies was left to the hobbyists to tackle in their spare time. Colony life was uncertain, and the priority was to survive, not to publish research papers.

There were more minkies around that year than I'd seen in the previous four that I'd been on-base. I found them appealing: and they were completely un-simian. I really never liked monkeys, not since my parents had taken me to see various species in a wildlife park and I had sat in the car in terror while baboons ripped off wing mirrors and slapped their horribly human palms on the windshield.

Minkies were a meter and a half tall fully grown, part elephant skin and part glossy fur, which made them look like luxury sloths with a bad case of mange. I have no idea who gave them the name but it made people laugh and reduced the aliens to the safe status of cartoons.

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Some were light gray, and some were dark charcoal, almost black, and that fur really was mink-like. But there was no fashion in the making there. When they died in my surgery, as they usually did, the fur was the first part of them to start decomposing.

The part-time xenologists had been studying them for years, but it was slow going. These were not animals, and they made it clear with charging gestures that they didn't want to be observed unless it was on their terms. I admired the creatures for that. Unlike humans overtaken by a technologically advanced colonial power, minkies didn't want anything back from us. They left us alone. They were too preoccupied with fighting each other, and there seemed to be an endless supply of them ready to join the battle.

Derra Houlihan, the closest person we had to a xenologist, said it was all over food-gathering rights, but all I knew was that the injured and sick had started to come to my clinics because the main medical center in the settlement turned them away.

I didn't mind at first. I was there to treat the fit, young support personnel, and as any ship's doctor could tell you, young fit people just broke bones, drank themselves sick or caught STDs. It was basic doctoring, the sort even an SFTO medic like me could handle, so I had time on my hands. The minkies didn't complain about my lack of skill with needle samplers either.

The more the minkies turned up, though, the more they were reminding me that I wasn't fulfilling my mother's high expectations of my medical career. As a child, I'd wished for siblings to divert her attention from me, and as a married man, I prayed unsuccessfully for children for the same reason, but neither happened. I wondered if saving the occasional minkie would have placated her.

Colonists and support personnel didn't mix socially. We discouraged it, and so did they. The colonist mind-set was stable and familial, and the support personnel were all single-status military or techs on five-year deployments. You couldn't sustain any sort of family relationship over a twenty-five year time differential, so it was a posting that attracted the young, the coerced, or the alienated. There was a time when I kidded myself that I was in the first category. The peacekeeping troops were mainly both young and coerced. What peace they were designed to keep, we didn't know, but they did secure new areas, provide engineering muscle, and round up those for whom even the modest ration of weak beer was a little too exciting.

It wasn't that the support team and colonists didn't try to bridge the gap. I had my share of morning appointments with pregnant colony girls who had been captivated by a well-filled peacekeeper's uniform, but I didn't do terminations. I sent the kids back to their own doctors. It wasn't my world, and I wasn't going to make decisions for it. The colonists were here to be people, but we were only here to do a job.

The average day for a doctor on a frontier colonial planet didn't reflect the imagined glories of the Raj. We didn't sip brandy and sodas on the verandah as the sun set over the tea plantation, and there were no tur-

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baned soda-wallahs attending to our every need. I spent nine hours out of the twenty-nine hour day in a cabin (this was originally navy territory, remember) that measured four meters by five and had no exterior window. My video screen was my view on the world. I didn't write letters home from my one-piece molded desk, as in the recruitment ads, because my father was long dead and I knew that my mother probably was as well.

She was sixty-three when I left Earth, and since I'd been here for four years and six months, plus ten years time-dilation, I stopped writing to her the first time I didn't receive one of her disappointed replies to my ethermails.

Bob told me that I ought to request official confirmation, but I couldn't face ten years waiting to be told that she was fine and then start the cycle over again. I pronounced her dead, as a doctor should.

I did keep relative Earth time on my organizer screen, though. I had savings and investments back there to consider, and for people away for decades at a time, calculating compound interest was a major hobby. But I didn't want to be one of those homesick time-displaced types who dreamed of going back and then found they were so far out of realtime that they only had other unemployable space ex-pats to talk to. Was there an alternative? I hadn't worked that out yet. I kept in slow touch with my bank just in case.

The other twenty hours of the day, I held clinics, recorded health data for researchers, and loafed around. I read a lot. I estimated that I spent two and a half hours a day eating, all within an optimum nutritional profile. It was too easy to eat for recreation, and at 1.2 Earth gravity, carrying extra weight on Hera left you breathless and arthritic, as Bob had found out the hard way.

I also took an hour a day to walk round the country surrounding the base. I liked the reed beds best, especially in the frost. Tiny flying creatures with white fur darted through the plants, and I could sit in the grass with a flask of vodka and coffee and pretend that they were birds, and that the plants were just what they appeared to be.

We were on the coast of a landmass near the southern pole, far from the equatorial zones, where the daytime temperature topped 60 degrees. On a sunny day, it reminded me of New Zealand.

I wondered if I would ever visit Auckland again.

After four years, I could understand some minkie gestures and language fairly well. They were expressive patients, so I knew most of the code for levels of distress, parts of their anatomy, and supplication—but that was where it ended. The amateur alien-watchers were still arguing, when other duties permitted, over whether they had true language: they thought that minkies were more intelligent than chimps, but not as smart as Neanderthals, although opinions varied.

Without my colleagues' academic background, I was free to make the unscientific assumption that minkies were pretty clever. They'd found a medic, they could make me understand what they wanted, and they didn't like being videoed. I could respect all that.

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Minkies were only communal when they needed to be. I'd see them mainly on their own, or carrying youngsters, although they formed groups to pick the grassland clean of food, and, of course, to kill each other. I only saw grays with grays and blacks with blacks, so the conclusion I drew was immediate: there were at least two tribes. But this morning I'd found three adult blacks at the surgery door that opened onto the main compound. They were carrying another adult, a gray.

It had a chest wound. That wasn't unusual. They made their *ahk-ahk-ahk* noise of panic while I gloved up, and they tried to help me lift it on to the examination couch, which was a little high for them. It was dead, as far as I could tell. It stank of sulfur and fruit, and its beautiful silver fur dragged like carpet under my gloves as it began degrading.

"Dead," I said. I made two closed fists against my chest as best I could and made a long sighing noise. "Dead. I'm very sorry."

They looked at me, pupils snapping from wide open to pinpricks, but they didn't start their usual quiet humming. They just looked, and then they began flinging their arms wide. It was when I turned the body over that I began to realize what was different today.

There was an exit wound the size of a walnut. Minkie weapons were spears and clubs, and didn't do that sort of damage. It was a ballistic round. I had seen an accidental weapon-discharge injury to a soldier's foot around eighteen months ago, and it looked just like that.

I gestured to them to sit down on the floor, and I peeled my gloves off so I wouldn't get the smell on my comms touch-pad. I called the base commander direct, because doctors could do that sort of thing, even second-rate ones like me.

"I'll start an investigation," Commander Da Silva said. I didn't know if she had been this close to minkies before, but she kept her gaze on them the whole time. I interpreted their continuous arm-waving as anger. "If it's one of my personnel, they'll be damned sorry."

How could I explain that to the minkies? I couldn't wait for a linguist to show up, even if they could handle this situation. I tried the sorrow sign, hunching into a ball and humming, so I had either apologized or told them I too was grieving. They moved toward the door, but as it opened for them, one turned back and made a final anger gesture.

"I haven't seen them like that before," I said. "I'd say they were really angry."

Da Silva was rubbing her forehead with her fingers as if she were massaging away a headache. "Just as well they only have sticks and stones."

"You *are* going to investigate, aren't you?"

"Hey, I don't tolerate any of my people taking pot shots at the natives."

"It has to be one of yours, though. Have you got forensic facilities, or do we need to contact HQ?"

Her gray hair was sticking up where she'd been rubbing. "It won't be that hard. Most of the troops here are from engineer regiments. That wound's from a sniper's weapon. It's down to one of fifty infantry personnel, and the military police can shake that one out with good old-fashioned persistence."

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"I hope they've not started hunting them. It's boring out here for combat troops."

"Maybe the minkies were raiding crops." But she shook her head sadly. "No, they don't do that, do they? They leave us alone. They're good little aliens."

"You'll let me know?"

"Of course."

I knew that she would. Some people thought that the military were savages under their polite formality. But I was always heartened by how their human decency held out long after civilians had started tearing their neighbors apart. You noticed that sort of thing in federal Europe.

Da Silva sent me a message three days later. One of the infantrymen had hired his rifle out to a seventeen-year-old colonist for a bottle of vodka. It was a civilian matter now, and the soldier was being shipped back to HQ for court martial.

He was facing five years' imprisonment. The colonists, on the other hand, decided to take no action against the youngster, confident that there would be no repeat of the incident.

The minkies stopped coming to my surgery soon after that. It bothered me. I walked out into the tall grass one lunch-break and looked for them, but I had to walk a long way before I found any. There was a group of adults, twenty or more, and they weren't gathering seed heads. They were just sitting in smaller groups, blacks and grays together, apparently talking. They looked at me, then went back to their meeting, although two of them stood and tipped their heads back sharply a few times as if they were greeting me.

I don't know if I was surprised when the warning klaxon sounded across the settlement the next morning. I could hear it in the one-piece shower-toilet, and there were repeaters in every corridor in the base, so everyone knew that there was an emergency. I stuck my head out of my cabin, because I hadn't even dressed yet, and there was just the hum of voices from the civilian support staff in my corridor who had interrupted showers to see what was going on.

I heard someone say that a farmer called Moore had been stabbed to death by minkies while he was in a field, testing the moisture content of an experimental wheat crop. I didn't know him.

"I never thought they'd do *that*," said my neighbor, Martin Sengupta, who was a hydraulic engineer. "After all these years."

I closed my door and finished dressing.

The incident dominated news on the shared message network between colony and base. Some people lived for that network, even though with only two thousand colonists and six hundred support we were still at the scale where face-to-face contact was practical. Bob had even painted one entire wall of his cabin with the screen smart-paint so that he could download changing landscapes, but I settled for something less intrusive, about a meter square.

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THEY'VE STILL GOT TROOPS OUT LOOKING FOR THE MINKIES, a colony message said. I asked the screen to scroll down. THEY JUST DISAPPEARED INTO THE WOODS. WE'VE GOT OUR OWN PATROLS. WHY HAVE THEY STARTED DOING THIS AFTER TWENTY-SIX YEARS? Further down, a reply with a base ID said: BECAUSE YOU SHOT ONE OF THEM, ASSHOLE. It reassured me for some reason.

One official message at the end of the thread brought the day's debate to a close. It was from Commander Anne Da Silva, and read: THIS IS A DECLARATION OF MARTIAL LAW. ALL CIVILIAN PATROLS WILL CEASE IMMEDIATELY. PEACEKEEPING TROOPS HAVE BEEN DEPLOYED AND ANY COLONIST FOUND WITH WEAPONS WILL BE DETAINED. ESCORT TROOPS WILL ACCOMPANY ANYONE NEEDING TO WORK IN ISOLATED AREAS BUT ALL OTHER CIVILIAN PERSONNEL SHOULD REMAIN IN THEIR HOMES UNTIL FURTHER NOTICE.

I had a lot of time for Anne Da Silva.

The next day, despite patrols, an eighteen-year--old boy was found with spear and club wounds right in the center of the settlement's neat grid of roads. I had no doubt that the minkies were going after the colonists now. There were fewer than three thousand humans, and millions of minkies, judging by the reports we got from survey teams.

It was a matter of time. They were small, fast, and organized, and this was *their* planet. I thought of going on the network and reminding everyone of the historical parallels, but that would only serve to make me feel intelligent and wouldn't have altered the situation at all. I stayed in the base, just in case I was wrong and the minkies *didn't* think of me as one of the good guys.

Bob wasn't in drinking mode that week. He was busy strengthening perimeters and checking security monitoring with his team, puffing and red-faced all the time. He really needed to get his weight down. I ended up in the military bar, a single room with low-alcohol beer in a pay dispenser and a cupboard full of those irritating skill games embedded in clear polymer globes. I hated their smug little voices telling me that the game was over and that I could try again. Anne Da Silva was sitting at a table on her own, turning one of the games over and over in her hands. She never struck me as the game-playing type.

"How's it going, Commander?"

She looked up at me and patted the cushion on the seat next to her. "Minkies three, colonists nil." She had those bruise-colored marks under her eyes that people with Indian or Mediterranean blood got when they were very tired. "And we're holding four colonists for carrying offensive weapons."

I sat down. "Knives?"

"Oh no, guns. Didn't you know? They started out with an issue of small-caliber rifles for what was euphemistically called agricultural use. Now they've got an arsenal of homemade pieces. That's why ray guns never made it out of the comic books, Dr. Drew. You can make a very effective rifle out of next to nothing, and it's low tech, easy maintenance. You need a bigger caliber to take out a minkie, though, and they're working on that."

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She stared at me for a few seconds, and I wasn't sure where to look. "It's Frank," I said. "I take it the mood is getting ugly, then."

"I've got a bigger problem with colonists than I have with minkies, if that's what you mean. That's peacekeeping for you."

"I thought we'd selected colonists for stability."

"We're on the third generation now. They've reverted to being regular humans. Civilized, polite, and always a drink or a grievance away from turning back into savages."

I didn't ask her what she based that view upon, because I knew that the details would be depressing. "If there's anything else I can do, ask."

"I'm considering talking directly to the minkies. Want to help? They probably associate you with more positive human attitudes. There's only you, Bryant, and Houlihan who seem to give a damn about them."

I was a second-rate doctor, but I was as good with minkies as anyone. For a moment, I grasped excellence of a kind, and it felt good and warm in my chest. "Of course."

I hadn't seen any minkies for a while now, not even injured ones. It was as if they'd stopped fighting each other.

It was the end of the second week since the first stabbing. Troops were searching colonists' homes and confiscating weapons, but there had been no more minkie raids. I walked out into the grassland with Bryant, a system engineer who liked practicing his linguistic skills on minkies, and a discreetly armed Da Silva. Small numbers, low profile, she said. It was the first chilly morning, an early sign of winter approaching. We were a kilometer out from base before we saw our first minkie.

I had no idea how they worked out whether we were good or bad humans in their books, unless they recognized me or Bryant. I assumed that we all looked the same to them. I certainly couldn't tell one minkie from another very easily, even now.

This one was gray. It walked up to us with its swaying, side-to-side gait. It was carrying a spear in its hand rather than in a holder across its back, and there was an intricately woven red strap across its steel-shiny chest fur. Bryant began jerking his head back in that greeting gesture, and I followed suit immediately.

Da Silva sat down in a dusty patch of earth in the grass. It struck me as brave, but I had confidence that she knew what she was doing. The minkie sat down too, and there we all were, sitting in a circle and staring at each other, waiting. They really did remind me of sloths. It was the tapering muzzle as much as the body shape.

Bryant made the grief gesture. His humming wasn't good, but the minkie appeared to get the point, because it began a series of clicks and hisses that it repeated carefully. You got to recognize speech patterns in time. Bryant spent half an hour repeating parts of the sequence, until sweat began beading on his bald patch. I tried to help out. Eventually, the minkie scraped a humanoid stick figure with its middle finger in the dust in front of Da Silva: an exaggerated long shape, with a massively oversized head. So that was how they saw us.

"They want the kid who killed the minkie," Bryant said. "They know he

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hasn't been punished. They saw him walking around. If we hand him over, they'll leave us alone."

It struck me as a request any nation would make of another. Would we grant it? I looked at Da Silva, but there was nothing, absolutely nothing on her face that I could read. "I'll contact them here this time tomorrow," she said. "Can you explain that, Bryant? I need to think."

We walked back to the base in total silence. I wasn't going to ask her what she was going to do. She was a month away from HQ and ten years from Earth, and none of us had that much time. It was her decision.

She went back to the site with Bryant the next morning, or so he told me. She didn't ask me to go. There was no reason why she should have, but I was hurt just the same.

Bryant said that she was handing the kid over to them and that I should prepare for casualties at some point.

My personal pager sounded around lunchtime and asked me to stand by. I hit the cascade call-out alarm to alert all paramedic-trained personnel on-base, put my report on save, and went down to what was the central assembly point. Troops were taking up positions, and I knew that they were bringing the kid in from civilian custody.

Da Silva stopped in her brisk walk past me. "Crank up that infirmary, Frank," she said. "We've had to fire warning shots, and there's a transport of colonists four minutes behind us. Plus minkies."

I could have stayed in the infirmary, and I should have. I wasn't a spectator. But I had to watch, because I thought something important was going to happen, and I didn't want her to think I was a coward. I followed her outside.

The gates of the newly erected perimeter fence—Bob's latest project—were locked shut. Through them, I could see the dust plume from a transport a minute away, and when I looked around, I could see five black minkies on the inside of the fence, just standing to one side of the sentry booth. There were probably scores more in the grassland nearby, but I couldn't see any movement: there was just the scent of sulfur.

A dozen soldiers with visors drawn down stood around the gate, and there were others moving around the flat roofs of the base buildings. The colonists' transport pulled up just short of the gates, and two men in overalls stepped down, both with rifles. The weapons looked stylishly simple compared to the attachment-adorned guns the troops carried. They didn't look deadly at all.

"We insist on civilian jurisdiction," said one of the men. "That kid was cleared."

"You were offered the opportunity to hand the detainee over yourself." Da Silva was a meter from the mesh gate, holding her rifle across her body although it was already supported by her webbing. "As military commander, I have the right to invoke martial law if I feel the colony faces serious danger. If I don't resolve this, we'll all be dead within a year. They'll pick us off."

"The minkies are animals. They'll *kill* him. You should be punishing *them,* not us."

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"If they're animals, they have no responsibility in law for alleged crimes," she said. It was all civilized and rational, except for the guns. "If they're *not* animals, then they have a right to try someone charged with a crime in their territory. You want to choose?"

The man paused. The rest of the colonists poured out of the transport, thirty or so, and aimed their guns into the compound. Troops raised their rifles around me, and it felt as if they had done so all in one tidal movement. The two groups stood, weapons leveled against each other.

"There are two thousand of us. We could take him."

Da Silva hadn't aimed her weapon up to that point, but she leveled it now, and her body didn't move at all. I didn't know how she could do that so easily. "You take another step, and we'll open fire," she said. "Just go back to your homes."

"If you hand that boy over, you've as good as murdered him."

There was a silence, and I could hear the grass rustling. The minkies were watching, but how much of this they could understand, I just didn't know. They weren't stupid. They could see the guns, and they knew what guns did.

Then they stood up. There were hundreds and hundreds of them, blacks and grays, all with spears and clubs, right behind the colonists. The spear-carriers had their weapons poised, a bizarre army of javelin throwers, absolutely still. Lowest tech would beat low tech, with those numbers. None of the colonists moved. They didn't even look behind them. But they must have known from the smell and the rustling at their backs that they were cut off.

"No," I shouted. I held my arms up; I had no idea why. The minkies furthest from me turned their heads toward me. It was a stupid thing to do, as stupid as saying no to a dog, but I did it anyway. And it was stupid to shout in a tense situation and risk startling someone into firing.

A couple of colonists risked a glance over their shoulders. Suddenly, the rest started to lower their rifles. I saw a flicker of movement to my left, and, for a moment, I thought one of the soldiers was going to open fire. Trained or not, kids could panic. But they kept their rifles level, and the colonists got into their transport, started the engine and swung round back onto the dirt road.

The whole incident had lasted less than four minutes. The gates opened, and minkies streamed in, more than I'd ever seen together at one time. Two military police brought the colonist boy out of a nearby building, and the minkies surrounded him like sheepdogs, nudging him out of the gate and onto the road. A two-man transport followed with an armed escort, just in case the colonists had changed their minds down the road, and kicked up a cloud of khaki dust that gradually hid the minkies from view. All I could see was the vehicle and the boy, short and shaven-headed and altogether too nondescript to be the pivot of a diplomatic drama.

I didn't watch the procession any further. Da Silva caught my eye.

"Brave choice," I said.

"The only one I had." There was a sweat mark down the back of her shirt even though it was a cool day.

"Do you want to talk about it?"

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"No. My decision. No point burdening you."

"Do we know why the kid did it?"

Da Silva nodded. "He wanted to hunt."

She walked back into the main building, and never mentioned my stupid display. I went back to the infirmary. It was a full day before the shock of the incident hit me. I found it hard to sleep that night, because I kept thinking how easily I could have started the whole crowd firing.

I passed my sleepless hours wondering what Anne Da Silva did for fun. Perhaps she didn't have any: she was isolated by rank among her own, and by age among the civilian workforce.

On the other hand, a doctor—even a colonial quack like me—had something of a neutral position. I practiced asking her to go for a beer until eventually I fell asleep.

The following days were silent rather than quiet. Troops still patrolled the settlement and confiscated arms, although some of the colonists had shown up at the base to surrender guns and ammunition. I was still on stand-by. I was walking across to the canteen when I ran into Bob, and he told me that the colonist boy had been dumped back at the settlement, bruised and torn but alive. I thought that I should drop by Da Silva's office.

I didn't fully expect to find her there, but she was sitting at her desk in the usual way. She looked tired, and I avoided staring too hard in case she had been crying. I don't know why I expected to see that. I just did, and I didn't want to embarrass her by noticing.

"So he's alive," I said.

"Seems so."

"Any idea what happened?"

"Bryant said the kid had to gather food for the family he's left without a provider. He has to do it every week as a condition of staying alive."

"Surprised?"

"You could say that." She paused. "Bryant says they wanted to show us how civilized they were. Maybe you could find out next time a minkie comes in for treatment. They seem to like you."

I didn't see another minkie that month. In fact, only six came in the next twelve weeks, all grays with minor injuries that looked accidental. There were no battle wounds. I cleaned them up and waved goodbye.

There was a woven basket left at my door one morning, red and black, like the spear strap we'd seen on one of the minkies that autumn. They'd never done that before. After that, I saw them when I went walking, and we would stop and converse as best we could, but they didn't come for treatment. The basket was a farewell.

One of them told me that they were "waiting to watch the invaders." I didn't fully understand.

They seemed to have stopped their wars for the time being. Perhaps *we* were the common enemy now, and when they were done with us, they would resume their food disputes as if we had never been there. Da Silva was right. There were millions of them and a few thousand of us. If they ever chose to oust us, the numbers were on their side.

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These days, I still drink occasionally with Bob, but I spend most of my time with Anne Da Silva. She makes a fine Goan curry, because that's where her family came from, so I do have a little of colonial India around to remind me how things can turn out for the conqueror in the long run. Anne persuaded me to contact Earth to confirm if my mother is now dead. She thinks I need that closure.

Sometimes I visit the minkie encampments in the woodland five kilometers from base, and I'm learning much more about their physiology and diseases. I take it carefully. One day being the kind doctor may no longer be enough to save me. One thing's certain: I can truthfully say I'm the best minkie doctor around.

And I've decided to erase the Earth-time clock from my organizer. My bank manager can send me statements when he pleases. O

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THE GRASS AND TREES

Eliot Fintushel

Eliot Fintushel makes his living as a movement theater artist. At any given moment, like the protagonist of this story, he may be a cloud, a rock, a washing machine, the nation of France, or a teardrop. He has been a finalist for the Sturgeon and Nebula awards, and he loves, loves to dance.

Any two spheres A^1 and A^2 (of whatever size, equal or unequal) are equidecomposable. I.e., they can be divided into a finite number of disjunct portions such that every portion in A^1 has a corresponding portion of equal size in A^2.

—from a theorem of S. Banach and A. Tarski

Roberta was pissed, mucho pissed. The asshole at The Grass and Trees wouldn't let her in. As if it wasn't bad enough chasing Dede's wild geese three thousand miles from home, in Pitston frigging New York, with air like wet sponges night and day!

And how come every city Roberta lived in, if she wasn't in the lockup, she stayed in some two-bit crib over a saloon in the skids? Toss and sweat on top of the sheets. Or open the window and let in the flies.

She knew why. Dede had said, "Stay at the Hilton now and then. I'll show some class, Roberta. I owe you," but the asshole porters at those swank dives, all powder puff and pomade, made Roberta smell her own armpits. She didn't like the way they looked at her. She'd get into an argument with the desk clerk and stomp out with the pen and a piece of his shirt. When it came down to it, the only places that looked like a night's sleep to Roberta were over saloons in the skids.

She turned a corner and found herself on another gray street where you didn't know which side of the sewer grate you were on. Debris everywhere. Pissed-on brick and doorways with, instead of stone lions or cigar store Indians, heaving, snoring drunks. No sky to speak of—it was choked with smog. Heat inversion.

She stopped at Jitsi's twenty-four-hour diner. It had been her first stop in Pitston: coffee and a bathroom, plus directions from the Greek. There

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were a few strippers and their admirers now, an off-duty policeman, and some cabbies wasting time. Jitsi eyeballed her as she came in. "You found it okay, the coffeehouse?"

Roberta took a load off at the counter. "Yeah. Thanks, Jits. They wouldn't let me in, though. I hadda show the guy my tattoo." She was too tired to care if Jitsi understood or not.

"Private party, huh? Moon and Stars, she's a quality person. Vegetarian. Everybody like Moon and Stars. Myself, I love Moon and Stars. Too young, though. All kinds of trouble. And maybe she like girls, you think so? Besides, I got plenty girlfriends. What about you?"

Roberta kicked her shoes off and sighed. Without asking, Jitsi slid a cup of coffee in front of her. Roberta fished a card out of her pocket and laid it on the counter:

*** M O O N * A N D * S T A R S ***
Spectacles, Phantasmagoria, Puppets
for
Festivals, Conventions, Parties,
Theatrical Events, Promotions
Of Every Conceivable Variety!!!
by
S. VERDUCCI, MASTER SHOWMAN
(Equidecomposablization Services Available
to Select Clientele)

She flipped it over and tilted it this way and that until she could see the rainbow—laser-printed, must be. Under the rainbow Sylvie had rubber-stamped:

Around Pier 39
3 PM to Midnight thru July
Book Now For Gigantic Discounts!!

"What about you?" Jitsi said again.

"Boyfriends? Hey, I got me a husband, Jitsi, and if you give me a hotdog with everything, I'll have a husband and a hotdog. A husband and a hotdog and a cup of coffee, in fact."

Jitsi nodded and threw a wiener onto the grill. "You married?"

"Yeah, I got me a biker in Portland, Oregon. Tattoo artist, Jitsi. Look here." Roberta hiked up her shirt to show Jitsi her stomach. There was Botticelli's Venus, her belly centered precisely at Roberta's navel, and the bottom of the shell along her diaphragm. "You should see what he put on my tits. But I think it would cost you more than a dog in a bun and a cup of joe. Whadda you think?"

Jitsi laughed. "I seen lotsa tattoos."

"Yeah, I was drunk when I married that bum. Nario Celeste. His tattoo parlor was like your place, open all the time. We slept in the back and got up whenever the bell jingled at the door. Nario Celeste. I'm Roberta Junker Celeste. I left him as soon as I got sober. It was about two months later."

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"No kids, huh?"

"Who said that?"

Jitsi flipped the wiener and started to grill the bun. "So how come you looking for Moon and Stars? You're a long way from Portland, Oregon."

"San Jose. I'm from San Jose. Nario's from Portland. I'm doing a favor for a friend of mine. Moon and Stars has something of hers that I'm supposed to see if I can get back."

"Hey! No trouble, huh?"

"No, no! Nothing like that. It's just some kind of memento. Some kind of personal thing. It's a mix-up, is all. Don't burn my dog, okay? I got this friend I did some time with years ago. I did her a favor or two, she got some dough, and now she wants to pay me back, see? So she throws a little work my way."

She rested her cheek on her fist and closed her eyes. "Hey, Jits, here's a story for you. Little kid turns to a tiger and nearly claws his sister to death. She comes to, a bloody broken mess, and all that's left of the kid is a handful of fur. After a while she heals up, and then she tries to turn the fur back into her brother."

"What for? He gonna claw her up again."

"He's a shapeshifter, Jits. He's her pot of gold, see? Then some bitch makes off with it, some carny from three thousand miles away. So she sends an old pal to track her and get back the fur ball."

Jitsi spun the plate with the hotdog in front of her. It oozed green, red, and yellow, and it smelled good. "I don't know about stories, honey. Me, I'm normal. I just wanna make love to lotsa women. Nice love. No rough stuff. Respectful. Me respectful she, she respectful me. Too bad you're not my type, huh? I show you what I mean."

Roberta rubbed her eyes. "Stuff it. You're not my type, either."

"Hotdog's on me."

"You're a prince."

The strippers and their gentlemen came to the cash register to pay. The men split the check. Jitsi winked at one of the strippers and said, "I like your boa. You're real beautiful tonight, Suzy."

The woman blushed. "I can be whatever you want me to be, Jitsi," she said with a wiggle.

"Oh, come on, Sue," the other stripper said. Then she said to Roberta, "She doesn't mean that. She's not like that. We're not like that. We're just strippers. We're not whores."

"Of course you're not, honey," one of the men said. He put his arms around the two strippers. The other man opened the door, and they left.

"Are they drunk?" Roberta stared after them.

"No." Jitsi began to wipe down the counter. "People just say funny things at two o'clock in the morning—you wanna bet some numbers? I got a side line here."

Roberta ate her hotdog and swilled the coffee. "Naw, I'm going to bed."

"Friend of Moon and Stars win fifty bucks on the numbers here two weeks back, boy name of Milo, fifteen, sixteen years old. Fifty bucks good money for kid like that."

"Did you say 'Milo?' "

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"Yeah. You know him?"

"Holy shit! Dede's not crazy after all. That Moon and Stars chick musta turned the fur back."

"Huh?"

"Nothing, Jitsi, nothing. I'm just mumbling. I'm just tired here, see?" She slid her toes back into her shoes and shoehorned them on with her thumbs, wincing. "I don't want to place no bet. I'll see you tomorrow, huh?" She trudged toward the door. Halfway there, she sniffed and said, "Something's burning, Jits. You should get some shuteye too, before you smoke the place out."

"Everything has its portion of smell," said Jitsi.

"What?" Roberta stopped and looked back at Jitsi. "Where'd you get that?"

"Milo says it."

"So does my boss." Suddenly Roberta was afraid that she had left the business card on the counter. She felt for it in her pocket. For a split second, sliding her hand down along her hip to feel for it, she thought the rainbow was a lizard in there and might bite her. She played the odds, like a man checking for a gas leak with a lit match that might explode if it hit the fumes—but probably not. It could be the death of her—but probably not. Then, feeling the card next to her switchblade, right where she'd stuffed it, Roberta became aware of the little drama she'd just been through in her mind.

"I gotta get to bed," she said, and she left.

The shapeshifters cleared a space at the back of the coffeehouse, formed a circle, and held hands. It was Milo's first time with the group, although he was already known to them as a prodigy. Curly headed, with a lemur's eyes and the wiry body of an acrobat, he kept looking to Sylvie for clues, what to think, how to manage his face. He was fifteen, she seventeen and an old hand at the Banach-Tarski. She smiled through wisps of that long brown naiad hair of hers and shushed him. Dr. Devore, a dwarf nearly, in patched tweeds, with an Einstein's mop of hair, stood out front by the bay windows.

He switched off the lights. "My dear shasha family, it's time for our workout."

"Workout?" Milo whispered to Sylvie.

"Just stay awake now, little man—really awake. And shush." She gave his hand a squeeze.

Their bodies effervesced. Their skin ceased to be boundaries, then ceased to be skin. They were a seething liquid. Milo felt drenched with shashas, soaked to the bone; but then he had no bone. The shapeshifters were a field of points, countless and vast.

There had been twenty of them, ordinary looking folks; now they were a perfect sphere, eight feet across, then two spheres, each of them eight feet across, then two worm-like cylinders undulating around each other in a double helix. Then they were a cube, a hundred cubes, like dice rolling on the floor of The Grass and Trees, then colored planes spinning, then things that cannot be seen, dark matter in the interstices of quarks and bones.

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They hummed as one, shivered in waves like gooseflesh. What one felt, all felt, terror and bliss, winking out or blinking awake. Then they became heavy, as if filling with the weight of the everyday world again. They began to be separate people. The mothers among them swore that this return was like giving birth, but painlessly and from every pore, not just the birth canal.

Milo whispered Sylvie's name—his mouth and eyes were perfect o's.

Devore interrupted their game of eyes. "Anybody know someone named Roberta?" He had had to leave them during the Banach-Tarski exercise, Devore said, to check on someone banging at the window. The shashas, in the rapture of their transformations, had noticed nothing. Girl wouldn't go away, kept banging on the glass, a rude tramp saying lots of things of which Devore could only make out a few obscenities and the name "Roberta." Finally he'd had to peek around the screen to tell her directly, through the window, to please go away. She flipped him the bird, mouthed two words to go with it, then walked away.

There had been one thing more, Devore admitted when Sylvie pressed him about the smudge on the window. The girl had mooned him. She had started to leave, but then, caught up in a swell of rage, she stepped back to the window. She turned and pulled down her jeans and underwear, exposing two round pimply cheeks with symmetrical cherubs tattooed at the bulges. Under the cherubs, in florid cursive, it said: "LASCIATE OGNI SPERANZA, VOI CHE ENTRATE," divided at the anus, in the middle of "SPERANZA." *Abandon all hope, you who enter here.* She pushed her buttocks against the window; they flattened and spread.

Let it pass, was the consensus. They were shapeshifters, Dr. Devore's flock. The Grass and Trees, a funky bohemian coffeehouse to outsiders, was the shashas' temple. How could any mortal harm them?

"Forget the ruckus. Line up the chairs." Sylvie stood up on a table. "Milo and I want to show you a new piece we've worked up. It's better than my *Stone Monkey and Yama*. . . ."

"Never!"

". . . Oh, yes. Introducing: *Apollo and Daphne!*" To Milo: "Hop to, little man."

Backstage, below the splash of lantern light against the shadow screen, Milo and Sylvie rubbed. He reached for a puppet across Sylvie's arm and could hardly help sliding his arm just a little lower to graze her side. Whenever one hand was free, Sylvie rested it on Milo's back or hip or leg. He did the same. He looked at Sylvie when he spoke Apollo's lines, "Sweet Nymph, you are my home, as I am yours. Will you not lie by me?"

And when Sylvie delivered Daphne's rebuke, she teased Milo, brushing seductively against him, almost losing hold of the rod that moved Daphne's hand. "Oh," she recovered, "my strength fails me! Protect me, River God, from this amorous foe!"

But no improvisation could save them in the end. Daphne was transmuted into the laurel tree by a deft substitution of cardboard cutouts. Apollo departed toward the lantern, growing fainter and larger till he disappeared. The lantern was supposed to fade to black, but Milo misman-

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aged the wick. It flared again unexpectedly in the darkness that was supposed to precede wild applause. There was laughter instead: Milo and Sylvie were silhouetted on the scrim; two slender youths, Sylvie the taller by a good two inches. They twined together. They kissed and kissed.

Milo blushed. Sylvie laughed, yanked him out in front of the audience and produced a laurel wreath, which she laid on his head. She kissed him again, this time for the audience. He was flustered at first, but then he grabbed her arm and kissed her back. Everyone applauded.

Afterward, over hot cider and cinnamon: "Listen, Milo. I want you to go away with me for a few days. I know a great place in Vermont. We'd be completely alone, just you and me and the woods. A-frame cabin, nice cabin. Loft, kitchen, kingsize bed—straw mattress, but kingsize, see? Nobody'd know where we are. Not even Devore. Whaddaya say?"

"I don't know, Sylvie."

"I know. Listen, you got to learn to relax a little. Stop giving yourself a hard time, see? Haven't I been steering you right? When Devore found you, you were skin and bones—what was that, a year ago? Your eyes were like brass incense bowls, kiddo. You didn't even know what you were."

He lowered his gaze. "I killed Dede."

"Guilt sucks."

"She'd just come back from Juvenile Hall. I was so happy to have her back."

"Get off that, dammit. It was years ago. You were a little kid when you did that. You couldn't help what you turned to or what you did when you were changed. To your big sister or to anybody. Besides which, she was using you. I mean, even if she were alive, Milo, what difference would it make?"

"What do you mean?"

"Nothing." She looked away. "A bitch like that, who cares if she's dead or alive?"

"I cared. She guided me through my change'ums, Sylvie. She would count for me—'ten, nine, eight'—and I would shapeshift. She cared, Sylvie. Then I did what I did, and I ran away, all the way to the East Coast—I don't know how. She cared."

"She only did it to get stuff out of you. Jesus, didn't you say she made you turn into a credit card for her once? And a loveseat for her and her boyfriend? Give it up, Milo. You know I'm right. Besides, when it comes to that kind of counting, like I told you, there's only one number: one. One, one, one. Wake up, you dope. And stay awake."

"Okay, I know all this, Sylvie, but it's hard. . . ."

"That's the whole point, you doofus. We've got to make things easier for you. Dump the sister. Ancient history. Live it up a little, huh?"

He couldn't help smiling.

Sylvie shook him playfully. "Huh?"

"Okay, Moon and Stars, let's go live it up."

She pecked Milo good night and gave him a little shove in the direction of the basement room where he slept at Devore's indulgence. He climbed halfway down the stairs and had to stop. "Moon and Stars," he whispered to himself. "Sylvie, Sylvie, Sylvie." He touched his lips, pretending that his

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fingers were Sylvie's lips. Then he continued down the stairs, smiling the whole way into the dark.

Day and night, what's the difference, when the heat doesn't let you sleep? You douse yourself in rusty water from the shower down the hall, and the drunks downstairs keep you up till you're clammy again. Then the mosquitoes. Then the morning light.

That's how Roberta had met Dede, the dink at Juvenile Hall who talked all night, who risked her privilege level to smuggle in magazines without pictures or books that nobody understood—Who was "Banach?" What was a "Tarski?"—then stayed up reading them in the corner with a flashlight.

When it was morning by the clock, Roberta rolled off the bed and grabbed her clothes up off the floor. She didn't use the closets in these places. Closets were too dark. Things got lost. What if you got shut inside there? You could never find what you wanted in there anyway, only things you didn't want.

She cinched herself back into her shirt and pants, rolling up the sleeves, as always, to just below the cigarette burns. She used to start the day with a drink, but the sight of Dede's babies had knocked the monkey right off her back. That was two years ago in San Francisco, when Dede brought her up there from San Jose; she hadn't had a drop since.

Those babies! Those ugly babies!

She went to the sink, splashed water on her face, wiped it off and looked at herself in the mirror. *It's me all right. Same as always. Same pig's mug. Same bristles. Same bad attitude.*

Blade in her pocket, she braved the common toilet down the corridor, then descended the rickety stairs to the hall behind the bar and hit the alleyway. It was already hot—no—still hot. At the end of the alley, around the corner, there was a pay phone. She took out the phone card Dede had given her, tried it a few times, then gave up and called collect, via the operator.

A man answered. "What? Who?"

"Bill, it's Roberta. Put Dede on."

"Jesus, it's four-thirty. She's asleep."

Roberta allowed herself to feel like an idiot for five seconds—she'd forgotten the time difference—then bulled back, "Well, wake her up, William."

She heard him lay down the phone. Part of her mind was still in bed. She was replaying Jitsi's goodbye. *Everything has its portion of smell.* She could smell the bar. She could smell the alley, garbage, urine, a bakery down the street, car exhaust, burnt oil from a restaurant somewhere. . . . What about the phone? The phone didn't have any frigging portion of smell. Then Dede came on the line, just as Roberta smelled it—a faint scent of ozone.

"Hello? Hello?"

"Damn me, it's true," Roberta said.

"What's true? Roberta, is that you?"

"Portion of smell. Even the phone's got it."

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"Is that what you woke me up for, you stupid bitch? You don't even know what that means."

"So tell me."

"What did you call me for, Roberta?"

"I found him," Roberta said.

"What do you mean, *him?* You found *him?* It's not a *him* you're supposed to be looking for. It's . . . Jesus Christ!"

"I found Milo, Dede. He's right here in Pitston, New York, at a place called The Grass and Trees. That chick S. Verducci's got him. I'm talking about Milo, Dede, not the stinkin' fur ball. That lead from them businessmen come through, them businessmen out of Jersey, the ones with the rods who used Verducci for the equideco back in Frisco. Then I come across somebody who sent me direct, a restaurant guy. Turns out, he knows your brother."

"How do you know it's Milo?"

"He called him Milo."

"How do you know it's my Milo?"

"He goes around with S. Verducci. Besides which, 'Everything has its portion of smell.' "

"Anaxagoras. What are you telling me that for?"

"The restaurant guy heard this kid Milo say it. Fifteen-, sixteen-year-old kid, he says. May I rest my friggin' case?"

"I'll be there by tonight. Don't say nothing to nobody."

"I know—"

"Shut up. I might want you to help me with this S. Verducci chick. You got a problem with that?"

"Have I ever?" Anybody with a rainbow on the back of her frigging business card, Roberta figured, could not have much to offer against a switchblade. Roberta gave Dede her address over the saloon, the address of The Grass and Trees, and a description of where Jitsi's was. Then she paused. "Dede . . ."

"Yeah?"

"The handful of fur and all that—I thought you was crazy."

"I'm not." She hung up.

Roberta sniffed the phone again— "Damn me!"—and headed toward Jitsi's for eggs. She was trying not to think about the sounds she thought she had heard in the background at Dede's place. She was trying not to see, in her mind's eye, the closet door thrown open and those ugly babies crawling around, yowling and turning into things.

From a block away, Roberta saw the dwarf who had given her the bum's rush the night before. He was walking back and forth in front of The Grass and Trees, peeking in through the windows and knocking at the door. She decided to be nice, for Dede's sake. She wanted to make sure that Moon and Stars and the kid Milo were where they were supposed to be when Dede arrived.

The little guy wore a beret, inspiring in Roberta instant class hatred. He had a bloodhound's puss and glasses like ashtrays; Roberta could see the pale flesh of his arms. They had curly hairs on them, the kind older people

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get that look like they've been bleached, sticking out the short sleeves of a rumpled silk shirt. He knocked on the glass. "Sylvie? Milo? Sylvie?"

"Hot enough for you?"

He stared at her for a second. "Where do I know you from?"

Shit. He had stopped banging and was looking up at her like a munchkin inspecting Dorothy. "I get around," she said.

"No, no! I remember. *'Lasciate ogni speranza, voi che entrate,'* right?" He smiled.

"Look, I was upset, okay?"

"No, don't apologize. I thought it was quite wonderful, you know?"

"Don't get smart on me."

"No, I mean the Dante. It's Dante, right? Incredible idea to tattoo it there."

"Yeah, Nario, my ex, he's a real crack-up. . . . What are you, trying to bust in?"

"No, actually, I have a key. But I don't like to use it if somebody's inside. I don't want to surprise them."

This was an entirely new concept for Roberta, and it made her look at him differently. "You own the place or work here or what?"

"It's mine," he said. "Look, I'm sorry I had to turn you away last night. I didn't want to be rude, but there was a private affair in progress."

"Don't worry about it. I don't give a shit. I'm back anyway, right?"

"Right. Are you looking for someone?"

"Chick name of Verducci. Kid name of Milo. You know them?"

She saw wheels turning. She knew that look, a dealer's look, figuring out how much you could pay or how much they could get away with paying you. Or checking the getaway path, getting ready to stiff you. Or slapping together a passable lie while they put their mouth on cruise control and their lips on smile.

The eyes get a little glassy. The shoulders tense up.

"Yes," he said, "I do know them. They take care of The Grass and Trees for me. Looks like they're gone though. Want to come in and have a cup of coffee? Guatemalan Antigua, Hazelnut. . . ?"

"Sure, why not?" What was he being so nice for?

He took out his key, unlocked the door, and led her in. "Sylvie?" he called once more. "Milo?" No answer. He shrugged. He hit a light switch. The place was a mess, fairyland after a long weekend: masks and puppets, cups, glasses, crumbs, wadded napkins, tablecloths half on the floor, puddles of wine and beer, and half-eaten desserts on plates in the bay windows, on the counter, and on the radiator. Mice scurried out of sight when the door squeaked. "Sit anywhere. I'll make coffee. How do you know Sylvie and Milo?"

"It's cool in here." She walked to the shadow scrim and picked up Apollo. "What is this, a circus?"

He was plugging things in, pouring water, knocking coffee grounds out of screens. "Sylvie's a showman. Is that how you know her?"

"Yeah. When'll she be back?"

"I don't know. You're from out of town, aren't you? I'm Louis Devore. In my other life, I'm a psychiatrist, actually."

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"Stay away from me."

"Ha ha! What's your name? Where you from?"

"Celeste. I'm from Idaho."

"Not Roberta?"

"No, where'd you get that?"

"Celeste what?"

"Celeste Celeste. Whadda you care? . . . I want mine black, okay?"

"Sure thing, Celeste."

"Hey, Louie, they'll be back by tonight, right? I mean, what do they, sleep here or what?"

"Yes, they do. Where are you staying?"

"Some dump."

"Why don't you stay at my place? It's air conditioned."

"Forget it." She had no idea what he was up to, but this sort of proposition never had any percentage to it.

He brought her the coffee along with his own, hers black, his light brown. They sat down at a table near the scrim.

"Look, I'm not a dirty old man, if that's what you're afraid of. It's just that you're a friend of Sylvie's, right? And any friend of Sylvie's is a friend of mine. How long are you here for?"

"Not long."

"Well, there you are. Stay at my place while you're here. It's just across town. I've got a feeling about you, Celeste, and I like to go by my feelings."

She slammed down her coffee cup, sloshing some of it over onto the checkered tablecloth. "Look, why are you being so nice to me? You ain't gonna get another look at my tattoo. And what I got with Sylvie is strictly business, okay? We ain't old girlfriends or nothing."

But Devore wasn't listening. He was looking at an envelope duct-taped near the doorway to the cellar steps. He went to the doorway, pulled down the envelope, opened it, and read. "Oh, dear!"

"What? Is it from Verducci? What?"

"She's away. They're both away. For a while. Doesn't say where. Doesn't say how long."

Roberta held her breath for a moment. She wanted to think something out very clearly. Dede and Bill were on their way. They might have their closet critters along. Verducci wouldn't be here. Milo wouldn't be here. Dede would be pissed. "Look," she said. "I changed my mind. What about putting me up till they get back?"

Bill spoiled Dede's concentration. She tried to make everything look perfect, as perfect as it used to be when she'd had her Milo to make things good, but from the day they married he'd wanted out. He was a Nordic dreamboat, tall and blond, with a chin like an aircraft carrier. He always carried a comb, and when they traveled he took along a shower cap and a tube of some hair goop that you could only get at a particular store in San Leandro. Sometimes he would get it in the mail from his mother; Dede would have sent it right back to the bitch, ADDRESSEE UNKNOWN, except that it really did make Bill look good.

Their place was too small, and Bill was restless. Dede knew he wanted

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out, and it spoiled her concentration. It was hard work holding him there, in her life, as a sort of outrigger against her own ugliness. All she could do was to rely on Bill's fundamental inertia and lack of imagination, and to keep him happy in the bed department. He would smoke a lot of dope, watch baseball and football on the TV, do construction jobs when he felt like it, service her, service himself, and look out the window.

"What are you looking at, Bill?"

"Nothing."

"Come back to bed."

"In a minute."

Once, lying on the sofa, her face covered with *The American Mathematical Monthly*, she woke to hear Bill's father and mother talking to him in low voices. Her eyes opened. She saw summation signs, equivalencies, congruencies, decompositions, if and only if, and heard them exhorting him to walk out on her. She didn't move. She pretended to sleep. But she decided then and there, under G.T. Sallee's "Are equidecomposable plane convex sets convex equidecomposable?", to chuck Bill's family, move Bill with her to San Francisco, and find an independent source of income.

She hated giving up her Milo studies for the six weeks it took—Bill spoiling her concentration again—but she devoted herself to the *Wall Street Journal* day after day, following references and citations back through bound volumes and microfiche at the university library. . . .

"May I help you?"

"No."

"Are you a student here?"

"No. Public access, bitch."

. . . until the thing clicked that she knew would click inside her head.

She found herself a servile broker and started making money. It was not enough money to replace her Milo, but it was enough to allow her to concentrate on getting him back without the distraction of Bill's parents. She would keep Bill no matter what. Her father shacked up with a social worker in Redding, her mother prowling the dumpsters of Sacramento, and her brother turned to a lousy fur ball, Bill was all the family she had.

Even now, subdued, doped up, childishly delighted to be on an airplane over Colorado, feeling like he was playing hooky on the subcontractor whose pipes he was supposed to sweat together that very afternoon, he was quietly undermining Dede's concentration. There was a tickle in his brow that made Dede nervous. It was the kind of tickle that might mean Bill was going to walk out on her at the airport in Newark, New Jersey, and she'd never see him again. He was sitting beside her, slurping candied peanuts from the foil bag, pushing his nose against the window, and doing that nasty thing with his brow.

"What are you looking at, Bill?"

"Nothing."

She slammed her book shut, Balfour's *Magic Snake Shapes*. "You suppose the kids are okay?"

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"How would I know?"

The "kids" were in a fiberglass port-a-pet in the baggage bay. Dede had taped over all the vents to make sure nobody got a glimpse inside. When the stiff at the check-in remarked on the absence of air holes, Dede told him they were anaerobic. He gave her a look, but he tagged the thing and threw it onto the belt.

"We never took the kids along on a vacation, Bill. Don't you think it'll be fun?" Dede put her arm around him.

He didn't stir. He kept staring out the window. "This is no vacation. You're going to New York to get your handful of fur back from Miss Moon and Stars."

"We can still have fun. We'll get a room in one of them killer hotels, a honeymoon suite or whatever. You know what a good time I can give you with the kids, Bill." She nibbled his ear.

He jerked his head away, irritated. "Sounds good."

Dede pulled her arm back from around him. She got out her credit card—it wasn't Milo—and slipped it into the slot in the telephone mounted on the back of the seat in front of them. She dialed her own number, then pressed a few buttons to access the messages on her answering machine. Maybe there'd be a message from her broker. Anyway, she had to do something to get out from under the tickle in Bill's brow.

"Shit. I'm too late. I knew I'd miss you. Look, I can't help it; they're not here anymore. They went someplace. You're already on your way, right? Okay. But look, I'm on it. I'm right on it. They'll be back, and I'll be right on them, Dede. And listen, I'm not where I was. I'm someplace else; I, uh, I ain't got the address yet, okay? I'll let you know. Go back, okay? I'll let you know. You don't wanna stay in Pitston. It's a dump. Okay? Go Back"

Dede rammed the phone back into its cradle, unstrapped her seatbelt, stomped down the aisle to the bathroom—OCCUPIED—banged and banged and banged on the door— "Ma'am, it's occupied, Ma'am. Ma'am, it's occupied,"—until it opened and a terrified little girl shivered past her, and Dede fell in, slammed and bolted the door shut, then flushed the toilet to cover the noise she was about to make, leaned into the metal hole, and, as the pungent blue liquid swirled down, screamed.

"Roberta, you stupid pig, you can't hide from me. You dumb slut, you blew it. You blew it. No way in hell you're . . ." She had to flush again. "No way in hell you're going to stop me coming to Pitston. I'll find you, pig. I'll ride your ass and sleep on your face till Verducci shows up with Milo." Flush. "And when we take care of her, I'll take care of you, too."

She flushed once more for good measure, then washed her face and went out. The stewardess, Miss Occupied, was still standing there, looking concerned. "Are you feeling better, ma'am?"

"Yeah, I'm feeling a lot better. I love fucking airplanes. Honest to God. I wanna live on a fucking airplane some day—just like you." She went back to her seat, picked up *Magic Snake Shapes,* and tried to concentrate.

Devore's place was a mess; Roberta took some solace in that. It was a

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small Victorian, the eyesore of a middle class neighborhood: peeling paint, porch banister hanging on three screws, bicycle tracks across the patch of mud that once was a lawn.

Down the center divide of Devore's street there were magnolia trees, remarkable in this climate. The blossoms were brown and mostly fallen now. Roberta had a good view of them out her window. She had a funny sensation around the corners of her mouth, and it took her a moment to remember what it was—she was *smiling.* She had a window.

Crystals hanging from Roberta's window made rainbows in the hallway and on her wall. She had walls. Splendid brilliant edges of colored light tickled her as she looked out the window. The crystals danced. In the street below, children bicycled, played hide-and-seek, turned into soldiers and demons and superheroes dying and coming to life, fighting, flying, bursting into flame, or going home because their mother called them. She watched them for a long time with the window closed because of the air conditioning.

There was a shade of violet, as the crystals turned, that thrilled her. Again and again she spun them and bobbed her head until she caught the violet glint. It flooded her eyes and made her happy.

Devore had simply let her in and told her to make herself at home; then, after fussing for a few minutes in an upstairs room he said would be hers, he left. She took a long bath, then a shower, then ate a little of everything in the kitchen that was sweet, especially fruits: purple grapes, a kiwi, part of a mango, and half a pomegranate. She didn't sweat. She bolted the front door—Devore himself would have to knock—and walked around naked for an hour, turning on radios, the TV, the electric can opener, the microwave, the garbage disposal, the garage door remote, everything that could be turned on, and turning them off again, while her clothes washed and dried in Devore's machines.

Then she jumped on the big soft bed that Devore had made for her—after his fashion—rolled off the other side, stood up, looked at herself in the mirror, spanking clean, shampooed, conditioned, bath-oiled, and powdered, and she sang the song from West Side Story, as nearly as she could remember it:

"I feel pretty, re-al pretty.

"I look pretty, look pretty, look pretty.

"A committee should be organized to make me Miss America

"Or somethiiiiiing!"

She slitted her eyes, puckered, and blew herself a kiss. She got dressed. Then the window, the magnolias, the children, the violet light. *Not bad,* she thought. Maybe she could send for her little girl.

Suddenly, Roberta wanted to celebrate with a drink. But with the thought of booze came the thought of Dede's closet, and just as suddenly the desire was gone. Dede's closet. She decided to kill herself.

"LASCIATE OGNI SPERANZA, VOI CHE ENTRATE."

"Celeste! Hey, Celeste! You up there?"

"Louie?" She heard him climb the stairs.

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"Mmm, what's that—bath oils? Smells good up there. I never use those." He was at her door.

"Everything has its portion of smell," she said.

Devore looked at her. "How do you know that phrase?"

"How the hell did you get in? I bolted the door."

"Smart thing to do. But there's a back way, through the garage."

"No, there sure as hell isn't. Have you been spying on me?"

"No, I told you, I'm not like that."

"You look like that. You look like a short little, old little, dirty little man." All he had to do was say one word now, and Roberta would show him what kind of percentage there was in trying to take advantage of her. She probably wouldn't need the switchblade.

"Do you like the room?" he said.

"What?"

"This room. You like it? Enough light in here?"

"You take the cake. What is this? Psychology? You trying to psychology me?"

"No." Devore took off his beret.

Short people and hats, Roberta thought. *As if it could change them.*

"Look," he said, "I'm offering you my house. There aren't any strings. I'm interested in you, that's all. You're a friend of Sylvie's. I'm curious. Leave if you want to. I haven't been spying on you. I have another way into the house besides the front door. You're right, there's no garage door; I made that up. I just want to keep my other entrance to myself, you know? I think I get to do that, don't I, it being my house and all?"

She had to laugh. He was so elegant, so exquisitely self-effacingly courteous. A munchkin. "Yeah, it's your place. What are you, rich?"

"No. I do comfortably, that's all."

She was sizing him up very carefully, trying to guess what he knew by how he moved and talked, but he was good, he was a shrink, he knew psychology. "Did you hear me singing?"

"No. Do you sing?"

"Like an angel."

"May I sit down?"

There was a Lazyboy inside the door. Roberta sat on the edge of the bed and said, "Suit yourself. It's your friggin' chair." He sat. "What are you curious about? In me, I mean? You said you was interested in me."

"Well, for example, that thing you said about smell. Did you know it came from Anaxagoras?"

"Yeah, I heard that."

"Where?"

"Friend of mine mentioned it. Anaxagoras, yeah." She tried to stay on her toes, but she was becoming fascinated by how ugly this guy was, with his face like heavy drapes, and always bunching up his forehead as if to apologize for taking up space.

"Did you hear it from Sylvie? She says that too, you know?"

"Yeah. Musta been Sylvie. Whadda you care, anyway?"

"Do you know what it means?"

"Yeah. Everything stinks."

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Devore laughed. Then Roberta started to laugh. She was starting to like this ugly little guy. He was too much in his brains to make trouble for anybody. It slows the reactions, she figured, to be that much in your brains. It takes you out of the competition.

"Hey Louie," she said, "you know what? No joke: I smelled a goddam telephone this morning, and I figure, it's true: if a goddam telephone has a smell, then everything smells, just like the man says. Is that what it means?"

Devore became serious very quickly, like a shallow puddle sheeting with ice. "Were you calling somebody in town?"

"You know, Louie, when you ask me things like that, it makes me think maybe you really are spying on me." He blushed. "So tell me. What does it mean?"

"Listen to me, Celeste. You are a good person. I was suspicious of you at first. I thought you wanted to use us somehow. But I can see that I was wrong. I believe you are a good person and that I can trust you."

"Is this gonna be about smell?"

"Yes. I'm coming to that. But do you know how I can tell you are a good person?"

"Fill me in, Louie."

"Because you pursued that question, Celeste."

"What question?"

" 'What does it mean?' "

Roberta stared at Devore. She couldn't see his eyes very well, because the sun reflected off those thick glasses of his. In the hallway behind him, through the open door, she saw a patch of light with a bit of his shadow cut out of its edge. The rainbow moment had passed. There was no more of that delicious violet. But Devore was delicious. He was doing something good for her that had nothing to do with the fruit or the bath oil or the fancy digs.

"My name's not Celeste. It's Roberta."

"Do you want me to call you Roberta?"

"Sure. What do I care?"

"There's a very old story about a king whose land is stricken by a drought because he doesn't ask questions the way you do, Roberta. He has a vision of a chalice floating before him, and he's tongue-tied. If it had been you, there never would have been a drought."

"I don't know about that, Louie. I don't even know what a chalice is. But I like how you're talking to me. Keep talking to me, okay?"

Devore nodded. "Tell me where you really heard about Anaxagoras. Was it from Sylvie?"

"No."

"Milo?"

"No. I never met Milo. As far as I'm concerned, the kid is a handful of fur." She laughed.

Devore took a deep breath and let it out slowly. He looked down at the floor and said, "You heard it from Dede."

"Yeah."

"We thought she was dead."

"Not yet."

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Devore paused, still looking down. He wrinkled his forehead, widening and relaxing his eyes—a strange private ritual. Roberta thought, *Migraines. The poor guy gets migraines, must be. Too much brain. Not enough sex. Small ugly chumps got a hard row.*

At last he looked up at her. "Okay. I'm going to tell you about smell. Then you tell me something about Dede. Is it a deal?"

"You don't wanna do nothing bad to Dede, am I right? I mean, she is a friend of mine, Louie. I owe her. You been real nice to me, but Dede I owe, and frankly, if it comes to you versus Dede—drop dead."

"I don't want to hurt Dede."

"Okay then. We'll see. Spill."

"It doesn't really have to do with smell, Roberta. It has to do with what things are made of. That's what Anaxagoras was talking about."

"And what's that, Louie?"

"Well, first of all, each other. Things are made of each other. Everything is mixed up together, you know? You don't have to be a scientist. You don't have to think about molecules, atoms, or quarks. You just have to understand that inside everything you see, there's something the same. When it's small and it flies and sings and eats worms, you call it a bird. When it's big and dark and far away, and rain comes out of it, well, it's a cloud. It's all the same though, Roberta."

"Okay," Roberta said. "Everything is each other. That's your first-of-all. That's what things are made of, huh? What's your second-of-all, Louie? Where are you taking me?"

"Smell, Roberta. For example, you've got a brain. . . ."

"Thank you for that, Louie."

". . . and that brain, like all our brains, grows out of something called an olfactory bud. Take it from me; I'm an MD, you know. In the animals that came before us, this olfactory bud was what took care of smelling. Our human brain started out as an organ of smell. Our mind itself started out as a sense of smell. That's what Anaxagoras was talking about. Smell is a metaphor for Mind."

"A what?"

"Anaxagoras was talking about Mind, Roberta. Everything has its portion of Mind. Anything can become anything, because it's all Mind."

"Louie, Louie, what does all this have to do with the price of fish?"

"Listen: when Anaxagoras was in jail . . ."

"No shit. He was in jail?"

"Yes. I will be too, maybe." Devore laughed a sad little laugh. "I've been censured by my professional organization, and the state Attorney General is beginning to show some interest." Roberta was impressed. She was starting to feel more comfortable about the beret and the GQ threads. "Anyway, Anaxagoras spent his time in jail the same way Dede did, if my guess is right: he was trying to square the circle."

"You can't do it, Louie."

"You know that?" He looked shocked.

"I heard it."

"The truth is, you can't do it the way he was trying to, with a straightedge and a compass, or even with a scissors, Roberta. You can't cut up a

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circle and paste it back together as a square of the same size. But Dede found a way, didn't she, Roberta? I mean, she found a way to turn things into other things. She couldn't change herself, but she could make other things change—am I right?"

Devore rubbed his hands together slowly. "She figured out how you can turn something into a golf ball or a baby or a pair of dice or a fog bank or a stone or a tree—because they all have their portion of smell, which is to say, of Mind. . . . What's wrong?"

Roberta drew away from him. She slid backward on the bed, then swung herself to her feet and continued to move away until she was standing in the farthest corner, her back against a closet door. When she felt the hinge against her shoulder blade, she shrieked. "That's what Dede was doing. That's exactly what she was doing. She's got a couple of 'em, Louie, a couple of wads of gook that look kinda like babies, but they're ugly as the bloody mouth of hell, and they change into things, and she can use them to get you to do whatever she wants . . . and she's always thinking up more."

"That's what she wants to do with Milo, Roberta. She sent you to get him back, didn't she?"

"Yeah. How does she do that stuff? Is she a witch? That's crazy, but it's not as crazy as some other stuff I thought of."

"We call people like Dede *operators*."

"We? Who's we?" She was shouting. She didn't want to—it just came out that way.

"Shapeshifters. Dede can't shift. She can only operate somebody who can."

"Are you one?"

"Yes, a little, a shasha. I can just do one thing, though; it's nutty with me. Relax. Come here. You're safe here. Dede doesn't know where you are, does she?"

"No."

"Well, I won't tell her. Come here. Sit down where you were. I'll show you what I am. I want to be your friend, Roberta."

She wiped her eyes. She hadn't realized that she'd been crying. "I don't need no friends. And just so you know—I got a knife."

She returned cautiously to the edge of the bed and sat down. When she opened her eyes after wiping them—it happened that fast—Devore was gone. A rainbow arched across the room, and Roberta was bathed in delicious violet light.

"Let's send for your little girl." Devore's voice rippled through the violet light. It took all night to pronounce the words, in shades of violet darkening and soaking in like a watercolor wash. "You should be here together." It meant, *Don't be afraid. You can be this happy.*

She turned in the light like a sunbather, sighing. "No,"—with a groggy chuckle— "no, I can't be. Don't be silly. I got nothing for no daughter. But don't stop, Louie. Please, don't stop."

All night he didn't stop. In the morning, when she woke, he was sitting beside her, drinking a demitasse. She opened her eyes and felt happy. She

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sat up. "Louie, I had this dream. I wanna bring my daughter here. Could I borrow a few bucks? Could she stay here with me? She's only four. My mother's got her in San friggin' Jose. She's cute as a son-of-a-bitch. I could get some kind of work and pay you back, I mean rent and all. Or whaddaya say, could I be your housekeeper? I done that once. Like cooking and that . . ."

"Yes . . . yes . . . certainly . . . of course. Roberta, it's an excellent idea. What's your little girl's name?" Innocently, he picked up the knife that had fallen out of her pocket when she sat up, and he placed it on the bed beside her.

"Lydia." She looked at the knife.

"Pretty name."

She weighed the knife in her hand before slipping it back into her pocket next to S. VERDUCCI, MASTER SHOWMAN's card, the card Dede had given her like a scrap of clothing to a bloodhound. Roberta blinked, and she saw herself butt-up on the pavement, smashed among the rotten magnolia blossoms and kids' bicycles. "I left some stuff in my room that I was staying in. I think I should go and get it."

Devore said, "Do you think so?" How did he do that? How did he swell the space around her mind so much that the life was sucked out of her bad thoughts? In his gaze, her dirty little thoughts seemed like bugs, transients, alien guests.

"Yeah. I gotta get my things."

"I'll walk you."

It was cooler. Cold front coming in from the west. Cirrus clouds, ice crystal ghosts miles high, promised rain in a day or two. A faint moon, gibbous, waning, followed them downtown.

"You had me going, Louie. For a while, I thought you was a rainbow."

"Incredible." She watched him stretch his legs and concentrate to match her stride.

"All that Anaxagus . . ."

". . . Anaxagoras, dear . . ."

". . . and the smell and the Mind and the whaddayacallits—shashas. All that stuff. You really had me going."

"It's a strange world, isn't it?"

"Yeah. I could see you telling stories like that to Lydia, you know? I bet she'd go for it. Would you go for it? You like kids?"

"Sure I do."

"I'd like to meet your friends, too. Can I? Your shasha pals? What a riot. Louie, you take the cake."

"I think they'd all fall in love with you, Roberta."

"You really take the cake, Louie." She slapped him on the back. He coughed, then blew his nose.

They walked together as far as The Grass and Trees. "I'm going in for a while," Devore said. "I want to see if I can figure out where Sylvie and Milo went."

"Whaddaya say I get my stuff and meet you back here in an hour or two? You know Jitsi? I wanna drop in on Jitsi too. I wanna say hello. Will you still be here?"

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"Depends."

"On if you turn into a rainbow, right? Ha ha! Lydia's gonna call you daddy. She calls all the guys daddy, did you know that? Hey, either I meet you here or else at your place, okay?"

"You have the key." He rapped on the door—just in case. "Sylvie? Milo?"

Roberta strode downtown. A few dust-heap souls snored in doorways, waiting for the sun to rouse them. Wrappers scudded by. Window-coffered wedges of buildings, shadow and glint, nosed like rats into the low sprinkle of sunlight. Ruined storefronts, with their small smudged windows, receded. Urine stench gave place to the smell of coffee and diesel fumes. Around the next corner, a few men and women read folded newspapers and sipped from Styrofoam cups, waiting for the bus.

At Jitsi's, she never let go the door, just peeked in and said, "Hey, Greek, save me a couple of eggs. I'll see you in five, on my way back. Guess what? My frigging four-year-old Lydia is coming to live with me here."

Jitsi was shaking fries in a wire basket over a vat of hot oil. "Hey, Roberta, someone was looking . . ." He started to say something, but as he turned toward the door, hot oil scalded his hand; he dropped the basket and stuck his fingers into his mouth to ease the burn.

"Later." Roberta laughed and headed toward the room over the saloon. Passing the pay phone outside, she thought of calling her mother in San Jose to set things up for Lydia, but she remembered about the time zones. Lydia would be asleep. Roberta's mother would be asleep. She could call from Jitsi's later. That would be more fun. Jitsi, the sweet jerk, would cheerlead.

She walked around to the alley and entered through the saloon's kitchen door, hoping to bump into somebody. She felt like talking. The floor was wet, and a mop stood in a bucket against the corner. "Anybody here?" No answer.

She banged the pots hanging from hooks over the butcher table as she passed them: *Shave and a haircut: two bits!* That was her mother's song. Roberta used to tap it out on Lydia's tummy, before she moved up to San Francisco.

"Hey! Anybody here?" She ran her finger along the dishes stacked in a drying rack on the steel sink: *Who ya gonna marry? Tom Mix!* She sang out loud, "Park by a fire plug: ten bones!" then wondered what in hell a bone meant. The dishwasher, a fat young man in a white apron, was asleep on a table in the saloon, softly snoring through his mustache.

She tiptoed past him across the saloon and into the hallway. She danced up the stairs, tapping out the rhythm with her steps—*Who ya gonna marry. . . ?* She reached the door of her rented room and turned the key in the lock.

Only it didn't click. It swallowed the key and began to suck at Roberta's hand. When she tried to pull her hand away, it hurt, as if she had punched through a window and her hand were trapped by jutting splinters. She heard high tinny laughter. It had her up to the wrist. She wedged her feet against the door and leaned back, but that made her hand hurt more.

She banged on the door, and it collapsed around her fist like a sheet of

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chewing gum, trapping her other arm in fibrous goo that smelled like dead fish. It spread down onto her hips and legs. Behind the melting, puddling door Roberta saw the room. There was someone in it, sitting at the window sill, backlit by daylight through the smeared and crackled glass.

"Hey, Roberta, remember me? I'm the one who bought your fucking plane ticket."

"Dede!" From the direction of the light something flew at Roberta, slapped her, then slid down and tightened around her neck. It was laughing. Part of it sprouted wings and yanked her into the room, like a vulture with a tow rope. Roberta blinked goo out of her eyes, but when she tried to open them, they burned. She hit the floor hard.

"Close the door."

The thing around Roberta's neck let go, and her eyes cleared; the thing on her legs, in her lap, and under her, the thing that had seemed to be a door, pooled and trembled away. She watched the creatures undulate to the doorway. The door had been open all the time, in against the wall. They slimed behind the actual door and swelled like a ball being pumped up, to slam it shut.

Dede stood up. She opened the closet, reached in, and unlatched the port-a-pet. "Bed, kids." Now they were gray babies, bluish along the ribs and digits. One had its blood flowing on the outside, like thick jelly oozing against its skin.

"Awwww!" They toddled toward Dede. En route, one of them turned and snapped at Roberta, showing teeth like ice picks in blood-red gums. She flinched, and it laughed. They moped into the port-a-pet; Dede clapped it shut, latched it, and closed the closet door. "Aren't they cute?"

Roberta sat on the floor, trying to keep her heart below her collar bone. Her skin felt cold. Dede sat before her, framed in fuzzy light. Roberta had to squint to see her clearly, and then little rainbows formed in her eyelashes, tiny slivers of color that broke like bubbles when her lashes moved, good-for-nothing little rainbows.

"Cat got your tongue?" Dede reached into the fringe of light surrounding her and extracted from it a pack of cigarettes. She hit it against her knuckles to make the cigarettes pop out, then lifted the package to her teeth. When she pulled it away, there was a cigarette in her mouth. She looked around. "Shit. The matches are over by you, Roberta, on top of my suitcase by the door." The cigarette wagged in her mouth when she spoke. "Could you bring them to me, honey?"

Roberta couldn't speak yet; she was barely keeping her panties dry. She reached around her until she felt Dede's suitcase with the book of matches on top. She crawled to Dede and offered them. Dede didn't move. Roberta opened the book of matches, tore one out, and lit it. Dede waited. Roberta reached up and lit Dede's cigarette, then sat down again and cried.

Smoke curled into the sunlight, passing abruptly into and out of existence with the shadows of the window frame, of Dede, of the smears and crack lines on the glass. "Thanks." The smell didn't depend on light though; that was everywhere. "I ain't seen you like this for a long time, Roberta. Perk up. The kids like you. You know that, don't you? They just about go crazy every time you visit us."

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"Jesus, Dede, what's your beef?"

Dede smoked. "Where's Milo?"

"Didn't you get my message? Him and Verducci went away somewheres, but they'll be back. You shouldn'ta come, Dede."

"You got him, don't you?"

"No. Jesus. What for?"

"Don't play dumb with me, Roberta, or I'll kick your ass into the closet."

"I don't got Milo. I never even seen him. I don't know what he looks like. All I know is a stupid fur ball, and I ain't seen that since you showed me back in sunny Cal, and I thought you was nuts."

"I'm not nuts."

"I know it, Dede. If Verducci could turn a fur ball into your brother, then you ain't nuts."

Dede reached back through swirling smoke, eclipsing the window. She tugged at the shade.

"It doesn't work," Roberta said.

Dede yanked it hard, and it stayed down. Then she sat down in the ratty armchair by the bed, in her crumpled navy blue outfit with the leg-of-mutton sleeves, a catalogue item. "I'm jet lagged. This place is a hole. Me and Bill are gonna check into some swank place. Why the hell do you stay in these dives, Roberta? I give you my credit card and all that."

"I just don't go for all that stuff, Dede."

"It stinks here." She reached over and stubbed out the cigarette in an ashtray by the bed.

Roberta smiled a little. "Everything has its portion of Mind."

"Of what?"

"I said, everything has its portion of smell. I got it from you, Dede. It's a joke. Can I stand up now?"

"Stay put. You didn't say that. You said, 'Mind.' You said, 'portion of Mind.' Where did you get that?"

Roberta thought, *Jesus, I spent the night in a rainbow.* It came back to her all at once. Anaxagoras. Squaring the circle. Operators and shapeshifters—all true. It was as if a part of her brain suddenly had a quarantine lifted. If Dede found out about Louie, she'd probably kill him or put him in a box like the kids. "Slip of the tongue, Dede. I didn't mean nothing. 'Portion of smell,' I meant. 'Smell,' like you always say. 'Mind' don't make no sense."

"Sit down on the bed. Sometimes I wonder about you, girl. You sure you ain't been talking to Verducci?"

"No, I told you, she's out of town. I ain't seen her yet." Roberta sat on the bed.

"Where you staying now? What's the new place?"

"I couldn't find no new place after all," Roberta said. Dede was giving her the fish eye. "I spent the night by The Grass and Trees, staking it out. The new place was right near there, see, only it fell through. I thought maybe Verducci would get back before you got here, and it'd save everybody some headaches for me to be right there. I'm tired as hell. I just came back to sack out."

"Sack out, then."

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Roberta slid across the bed and kicked her shoes off. She rolled over and pressed her face into the pillow. She wanted to scream, but she only wept, discreetly, noiselessly, dampening the pillow. She thought . . . Lydia. She let the tears go one by one; they relieved her one by one, but not much. She heard Dede light up another cigarette.

After a while, Bill barged in. "They're back," he said. "Can we stay a few days anyway? I got us a killer of a room. No magic fingers, but it's got a whirlpool and in-room movies and all that stuff. Hiya, Roberta. Stumbled up here, huh?"

Roberta sat up and wiped her eyes as if it were only sleep in them. She looked up at Bill. He was wearing a new designer shirt and stiff tight jeans. He carried a magenta shopping bag with dignified calligraphy, but he smelled funny.

Dede said, "Where did you see them? You saw both of them? Milo too?"

"At that place, at The Grass and Trees, through the window. I didn't go in. Jeez, that's a lousy neighborhood." He put down the bag and started taking out packages of clothes, handkerchiefs, underwear. "I only saw Milo, no Verducci. Little guy for fifteen. Was he always little?" He tossed a small package to Dede. "That's for you, honey." Then he said to Roberta, "Hey, the Greek in the hotdog place really likes your ass, Roberta. He stood me a coffee just for knowing you."

"Shut up, dammit." Dede threw down the package. "How do you know it was Milo?"

"Did he have a beret on?" Roberta said, then regretted it at once. *Don't help them.*

"Yeah, that's right," Bill said. "Say, Roberta, do you know where you can get French hats like that around here?" The meaning was for Dede—that he was ignoring her insult.

"Is that him?" Dede asked Roberta. "In a beret?"

"No," she said, "it's somebody else. He owns the place, that's all."

"That's all, huh?" Dede picked up the package Bill had tossed her and walked up to him. "Sorry I got mad, Billy. I'm beat. I'm tense." She turned to Roberta for a moment: "The stupid airline put the kids on a different connection, can you believe it? We hadda wait there. I was going nuts. But Billy talked to a supervisor for me, didn't you Billy? And we got the kids back in half an hour. But it was tense."

Dede grabbed his belt with her free hand and slid three fingers in. "This has gotta be one of the big moments of my life here, see? I'm gonna be reunited with my little brother. . . ." She paused. She looked at Bill. He looked back at her coldly. "What's that smell?"

"I did a little shopping. It was a fancy store."

"It was a cheap store, Bill. It was a cheap stinking store. I didn't know they were even open for business this goddam early. That Greek's must be some goddam place, all right. He got some rooms upstairs or what?"

She took her fingers out of Bill's pants and tore open the present. It was a bottle of perfume. "Oh, that's sweet. That's real sweet, Bill." She opened it and dabbed some behind his ears, while he pulled his head back and grimaced.

"Lemme go. I gotta go to the bathroom."

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"I bet you do."

"Hey, why don't you send the kids out to find your brother? They can follow a scent pretty good. Just like you." Bill left the room.

Dede stared at the floor. Her dress looked to Roberta like a cardboard prop that Dede stood behind; even disheveled, it was too bright and stiff for the stale pudding of a girl that filled it.

"You never seen Verducci, huh?" Dede said. "She's pretty, Roberta. She was in Frisco with Bill and me. Bill seen her. He woulda made the moves on her too, but he was too drunk. I didn't have the kids all educated then the way they are now, to watch him. Maybe he even done her while I was drunk asleep, I don't really know. That bitch. Sometimes I think the kids are the only ones who love me, you know that? Nobody else gives a crap about a hag like me."

Dede sighed, then pulled herself erect. "No, Bill loves me. But he can't run his own life, Roberta. Some people are like that. They need guidance, you know what I mean?"

"I know what you mean, Dede."

"Tell me about the beret guy. You're holding out on me, aren't you? Does he have *kids?*"

"Kids?"

"You know what I mean. Aw, never mind. You're a fucking liar, but I don't give a damn. Everybody's a fucking liar. We'll take care of him when we take care of Verducci." She laid her hands on her thin chest and yawned. "It stinks here, but we might as well stay till Verducci shows with my goods. It'll be just like Frisco. You, me, Bill, and the kids. Family." Dede sat down by the window and closed her eyes.

Roberta stared past her at the smoke-stained shade that scabbed the window. The sun had gone elsewhere. The rainbow hour was past. There was no crystal anyway.

"Yeah, family."

Dew sparkled upward in rosy light. Crystallizing on the air, still night-cool, it hovered, streaked, vanished. Sylvie was slow getting up. She stared up through the skylight at the clouds, steel gray puffs moving swiftly, not long for this sky of deepening blue. Milo had left the door open; a breeze whispered through. Far away, dogs barked.

"Milo?" Sylvie closed her eyes and stretched from fingertips to painted toes. The straw inside the mattress crunched under her hips. "Milo? Where'd you go, big man?" She giggled at her own joke. She stroked her belly with the palm of her hand, then moved up the torso to her small breasts, following the curve, finger by finger, like a feather moving up her chest, her neck, and under her chin. At last she touched her lips, and she yawned. "Milo?"

She pulled on a pair of pants and climbed down a ladder to the tiny kitchen. "Milo?" There was half a glass of wine left on the table from last night. She drank it and stepped outside into the sunlight that played peek-a-boo through dissolving clouds and the branches of cedars. She walked between the trees, stroking each trunk as she passed it. She looked out into the clearing.

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No Milo.

Bare-chested in the cool morning, she crossed her arms and hiked up her shoulders to keep the warmth in. She walked a few yards across soft green grass and tried the path up a gentle slope into the hills. "Milo?" Bird songs. The dogs, far away. Smells of mint, alfalfa, pennyroyal. She wandered up the path, through bracken and old fallen branches, until a boulder blocked her way. Water trickled over it into a tiny pool in the face of a rock below. There the path ended. The way around was too dense to pass through.

"Milo?"

A low growl—and her heart hammered. On top of the boulder a cougar crouched low, its shoulders and the muscles of its forelegs tense. Hips high, it shifted its rear legs by little, by little, flexing slowly, poised to leap, eyes glued on Sylvie.

She was too frightened to move. She was remotely aware of the loveliness of the morning, the bird songs, the slight breeze, the long shafts of sunlight dappling the path and glinting off the pool with each trickle of falling water. It was as if she were someone else, somewhere far away. And she felt stupid. Stupid to have wandered off alone half-dressed in a strange wood. She wondered if Milo would find her there, gnawed and bloody.

The cougar struck first at her chest and face. It pushed her to the ground and pinned her down with its forepaws. It was smaller than Sylvie, but much stronger. Musk and damp warmth. She closed her eyes. She felt the rasp of its breath as it pushed its muzzle against her face—but never the teeth.

She opened her eyes and saw Milo's. He rubbed against her, skin to skin. He kissed her.

"You bastard." She pulled back.

His fur melted into skin. The fangs retracted. He lengthened downward, like a sleeper pushing into a collapsed sleeping bag, until he was his full human length, caressing all of her with all of him. "I want to eat you up, Sylvie, but not that way."

Only, it wasn't Sylvie he was holding. It was something gray, rough, and leathery. Milo lifted his head away and spat. Then the thing curled up between his legs. He jumped sideways, and it pinioned him. Tusks sprouted on either side. Below him, an ear-splitting roar. He was lifted high.

"Down, Simba!" Milo dug his fingers in. It roared again, a glissando from an octave above migraine to two octaves below indigestion. Milo shut his eyes and pressed down on something inside himself as if he were defecating.

He was gone. The elephant curled its trunk around—nothing. Then, startled, it plodded backward: a field mouse darted, squealing, between its legs. The elephant tumbled onto its great posterior. Its features began to melt. It trembled for a moment like a huge Jell-O mold, then became translucent. A column of cloudy water, it thundered down over the mouse.

"Sylvie! Sylvie! Stop it." The mouse burst into flame, repelling the water into an orb of steam, itself at center, white hot. The steam whinnied and became a horse. It galloped down the hillside. The fire whinnied and galloped after.

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"Catch me, Milo." The steam horse sprouted wings and leapt into the sky.

The fire was a sixteen-year-old boy standing naked in a wide valley. He looked up in amazement at the winged horse. "Can you do that? I never thought you could do that. It doesn't exist, does it?"

"Doesn't matter," the horse said. "Everything has its portion of smell, Milo. Nothing's without it. Doesn't matter if it's a Fig Newton or a figment. Catch me."

He telescoped his spine down below his coccyx. It was like squeezing toothpaste out of a tube. This time Milo paused, as Devore had taught him, to see the field of bright points that comprised his shasha body. Like wiggling one's ears; like finding, wrists crossed, fingers laced, the finger someone points to; like learning how to make one's navel go round in circles; and like learning how to let a thought go (one . . . one . . . one . . .) Milo hovered in the field of points. He wielded the Banach-Tarski like a scimitar of infinite sharpness sweeping zenith, nadir, and horizon in a single cut. The points coalesced into an infinity of squirming, amoeboid clumps, and each clump gave birth to another. He could hear the birth yelps echo.

He lifted a green scaled head, opened the gigantic maw, blood-red and glistening in brilliant sunlight, and he breathed fire over the mountains. Milo's wing tips grazed the tops of the far hills as he arched back and spread what had once been his arms. The spines jutting from his vertebrae rippled from neck to tip of tail, miles below.

"Too big!" Sylvie whinnied, a mite in the dragon's eye. He blinked, and she was gone.

Milo beat his wings slowly, circling the valley. Nothing looked the same. The lines between objects were utterly new ones. The mountain together with all visible clouds and a certain sensation in the dragon's jaw were one creature. A chimney and the barks of two dogs scrabbling down a hillside were another.

Milo descended. As he drifted down he performed the Banach-Tarski again. The world exploded into a Seurat canvas and then into galaxies of shining points.

He was running on human legs across the open field beyond the A-frame. "Sylvie?" The winged horse was gone. He sifted small things between blades of grass. He scanned the hills, the sky, squinted at the sun. "Sylvie? Hey, Sylvie!" Too big, she'd said. Maybe he'd been too big. "Are you okay?"

"You just stay awake, little man."

A warm breeze tickled Milo. It swirled around him, stirring up a whirlpool of flower petals. "Sylvie!" He smiled. She embraced him. They kissed. She was a beautiful girl, the *saltimbanque* in the bowler hat who had brought him into Devore's magic circle and taught him what he was. She was Moon and Stars. She shook her head, and her long brown hair covered both their bare shoulders. Still embracing, still kissing, they kneeled on the grass, then lay down together below the cedars by the A-frame.

"Sylvie, Sylvie, Sylvie. . . !"

* * *

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They were loafing in the A-frame when Victor knocked, a shapeshifter from The Grass and Trees. He didn't wait for them to answer but pushed open the door. "That dragon—higher dimensions, right?" He was a buoyant curly-headed young man in a T-shirt with a necktie printed on the front. Milo recognized it at once and recalled what was on the back: a table of numbers from Cantor's proof that the infinity of decimals is greater than the infinity of fractions—as Victor was all too eager to explain.

Victor craned his neck toward Milo and Sylvie as if he were examining an unfamiliar piece of machinery. "How could you be that—whatever it was? And how so quick? A Banach-Tarski on higher dimensions? S^4? S^5? According to the math, it should work on any dimension higher than two. Don't tell me that that was just S^3, our regular three dimensions. . . ."

Sylvie rolled her eyes. "Victor, for heaven's sake." She grabbed some clothes from a pile on the floor. "What are you doing here?"

"Devore—wait a minute. What about it?"

Sylvie laughed. "Milo's the king of the shashas, is all."

Milo shook his head. "Shucks, I'm just an ordinary guy with Silly Putty bones."

Victor clucked his tongue. "Mine won't bend into dragons."

Sylvie threw her jeans in Victor's face. "You've got a lot of damn nerve barging in on us, you know that?"

"Calm down, Sylvie. Devore sent me."

"Dr. Devore?" Milo climbed to the loft, threw Sylvie's other clothes down to her and started dressing himself. "What for?"

"Somebody's looking for you, Milo." Victor handed the pants back to Sylvie. This time she pulled them on. "It's Roberta, the one who came to The Grass and Trees. She came again. You better climb down off that loft before I tell you the rest."

Milo leapt down and stood behind Sylvie, his arms crossed around her chest. She closed her eyes, smiled, and leaned her head back against his cheek, then remembered to scowl at Victor.

"Milo, Dede is alive."

Milo paled. His arms fell to his sides. "How . . ."

"I think maybe Sylvie has something to tell you, Milo."

Sylvie shoved Victor against the wall. "Damn you."

He shook his head. "You're not mad at me, Sylvie."

She sighed. "No, it's me I'm mad at. Devore found out about me and Dede, huh?"

Victor nodded. "Roberta told him. The woman who banged on the window at The Grass and Trees."

Sylvie took Milo's hand. It was cold. "I'm sorry, Milo. I knew she wasn't dead, and I didn't tell you. I didn't tell Devore. I didn't tell anyone. I ran into her in Frisco a couple of years back. I was doing street shows with my puppets, and also pitching equideco—you know, hiring myself out to do things for people, mostly illegal. She got hold of one of my business cards and gave me a call. She had this handful of fur she thought I could equideco back into her little brother. I boosted it, I don't know why; I used to just steal things—before Devore. She thought that that fur ball was you, Milo, but it wasn't anything."

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"She traced you through that card, Sylvie," Victor said. "Roberta was working for her."

Milo said nothing, did nothing, stared at his feet.

"Milo, honey, I know it was hell thinking you murdered her, but I just didn't see any percentage in getting you all worked up about Dede being alive. She's one scary bitch. Either way, nothing was your fault. Maybe it was stupid, but I never figured she'd follow me all the damn way out here. I mean—it was a lousy fur ball."

"I don't blame you, Sylvie." Milo squeezed her hand but never looked up. "I know you love me. And you know I love you, Sylvie. Only, what are we going to do now? Dede's alive. Dear God in heaven, my sister is alive, and she wants me back."

"Don't worry, Milo," Victor said, "Devore's got Roberta living at his house. You have to hand it to that guy. Our fearless leader is a one man recycling center, shit into flowers. Consider yourself, kiddo. . . ."

"How did the doc know where we were?" Sylvie asked him.

"He found a letter."

"He went through my stuff?"

"It was a kind of emergency, Sylvie. Devore called me. We were worried about you and Milo. This Dede—she's an operator. She knows a lot of the same formulas we use. And get this—she's got *things*."

"Things?" Milo said.

"She's not a shasha, but she's got these things. She calls them kids, Devore says, or that's what this Roberta told him. Sounds like she found some kind of sub-human shashas. That's what Devore got from this Roberta. And Dede runs them. They can't do all that much, I suppose, since they're not humans, but Dede can hurt people with them. Looks like that's how she kept Roberta in line."

"But she doesn't know where we are, right?" Milo untwined himself from Sylvie. He paced to a hexagonal window of stained glass and pretended to look out.

"This is the hard part, Milo. We need you to fight her. She's not a threat just to you anymore, but to all of us. Otherwise we'd keep you here, safe, away from her."

Sylvie stormed, "Why Milo, dammit? Why stick him in her way? He's her target. We can deal with any goddam operator without . . ."

Milo jumped in. "You know that's not true. I'm the heavy artillery around here now."

"He's right, Sylvie."

"It's my fault," she said.

Milo touched her cheek. "Guilt sucks."

She knit her brows and seemed about to cry, but merely sighed. "I'll pack our stuff."

Bill sulked. "Dammit, Dede, why don't we just go to that swank place right now? I mean, they got in-room movies, Dede. They got Jacuzzi in your own tub. We could nab your kid brother after we get a little R&R."

Dede ignored him and stared into the port-a-pet. She straightened her back and made her mind very calm. She knew how to: by flushing away

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every thought as it arose, beating it down by force of will, like shoving gophers back into the earth. She could do that. She did it every time she read a book. *Fundamenta Mathematica* was no bed of roses. Anaxagoras, in English or Greek, required attentive reading. Dede had steeled this part of her mind.

In half a minute Dede's mind was a three-dimensional grid made of empty space, lines—and will. She focused her mind on one of her ugly babies. Two little eyes sparkled at the air holes. Their pupils twitched when Dede tweaked her grid. This part was always a thrill, like that moment, learning to ride a bicycle, when its power becomes your power.

Dede *looked* just at them; it had taken her years to understand that *looking*. She had devoured equations, wolfed down proofs, definitions, axiomatic systems, and mathematical spaces so weird that they used to cross her eyes and turn her stomach upside-down. They had become her world.

"The world is made of numbers,"

Pythagoras had said.

The object of all her manic work—a handful of fur. The fur stayed the same, but one day she was working through a proof by Hausdorf when everything changed. She had been eating, sleeping, and breathing equations about things with parts as big as the whole. That was like Milo, Dede was thinking, melting from this to that. Then her eye roved to a corner of the room where a dust ball spun up and down the wall. Funny little critter, it spat out doubles of itself, then sucked them in again, seemed like. Was it a draft? A shadow? Maybe she had been working too hard? That's what anybody else would think—and forget it.

But when Dede's mind moved, the dust balls moved. She got up to get a closer look. The nearer she came the more they seemed to be a part of her own mind, changing as her thoughts changed. But they were real.

They became ugly babies . . . and other things. And they still did. What was this stuff? If it was there for Dede, it must be lots of places, she figured, but nobody had ever *looked* at it before, not the way Dede could. It must be like gold or like oil, waiting for the right person to find it. Now it was all hers—just as Milo used to be. Just as he would be again.

Dede opened the port-a-pet. The kids were an amorphous jelly with teeth, claws, and hair. One of them oozed over the edge of the case.

In the grid was Dede's intention: "Get me back my Milo." She shoved open the window, and the thing oozed across the floor, up the wall, over the sill, and out. It flew like black plastic on the wind, then a bat, then a bullet, then gone.

"You okay, Dede?" Roberta asked her, hoping that she was not. "You look like you're a gazillion miles away."

"That's my babies. A piece of me is inside 'em. I always know where they are. Whaddaya say, Bill? Do you feel the same?"

"Leave me out of it, Dede. They're your kids, not mine."

She winced as if slapped, then smiled. "We gotta hang out here at Roberta's for a while, Bill."

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"No!" Bill kicked the mopboard.

"Because you know why? I think the little guy, Roberta's friend, is gonna come looking for her here. And I wanna get him, Bill. I wanna get his ass and find out all about what Milo's been up to and what Roberta's been up to. I wanna hear it from the horse's mouth.

"I don't want no trouble getting Milo back, see? Because he's mine. And when I got him again, boy, it'll be a brand new day, believe me. The kids can't do nothing compared to my Milo. Bill, you're gonna be so happy, you'll bust a gut."

She looped her arms around Bill's neck and rubbed her hips against him. "And wait'll you see me when I got my Milo back. I can ride him. I can wear him. The things he can be for me. A credit card. A diamond tiara. A fucking Porsche, Bill. That Moon and Stars chick won't look so hot next to me then. And you won't give a second look at Jitsi's whores, Bill. We're gonna be so rich and set up, you're gonna never leave home, boy. You'll just wanna kick back and make love to me all day long. Whaddaya say to that?"

"Aw, come on, Dede. They got cable at that hotel."

Sure enough, Devore walked in, just like Roberta but through the actual door, such as it was, cracked hollow core with rusted hinge pins half out of their sockets. Maybe Jitsi had been mistaken about the address, he was thinking. Out of breath after the long staircase on short legs, he knocked. *Shave and a haircut . . .*

The door swung completely open, he saw a few fuzzy gray silhouettes against a bright window. Then Devore's chest spasmed as if a fist had squeezed his aorta. The colors in the room turned black for white. He crumbled. Blood flooded and swelled his lips and eyes until he felt like a dazed netted fish.

Roberta was there, echoey, blurred. Her face looked bruised, but Devore had lost his glasses—maybe that was it. "I'm sorry, Louie. I couldn't do nothing. Honest, I didn't set you up. . . ." A man twisted her elbow. She shrieked. She stopped talking. The man smiled and made her shriek again.

"Hey! You're a *thing*." Another woman walked up to Devore and stood over him, looking down with an amused grin. She gave him a series of little kicks in the ribs, the back, the head. He squirmed away. "I just wanna close the door . . . Louie." She pushed it shut, grazing his back, and locked it. "I thought we was gonna hafta strong-arm you, Louie. I thought you was just an operator like me. Roberta didn't tell us the whole story, did she? You're a thing, too, like Milo and the kids. A shasha. Is that your word for it? Shasha?"

"Shasha." Devore said it without breath, as deaf folks do, just sound and the mouth moving; he was half-delirious. He felt his body disintegrate into an array of bright points.

"Nobody ever done you, huh? Nobody ever run you." She scrunched up her face like a weight lifter. "You're different, you know that? I can't make you do nothing but one thing, feels like."

"It's because you got the kids on your mind, Dede," the man said.

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"Shut up, Bill. It isn't that. My kid'll find my Milo and bring him to me, one, two, three. This guy, it's that he just goes one way, is all, like a left shoe. I'm gonna wrap him round my little finger, though—you watch."

Devore saw, as if through a grainy video projection, the back of Dede's hand loom larger until it touched what used to be his face. The ring on her little finger had a small diamond set in it, but it looked like a mystical mountain range to Devore. His body steamed away. It tingled and pulsed. It hummed with electricity. The theorem she used was unknown to Devore. *An interesting decomposition,* was his last purposeful thought before he lost his mind. *I'll have to mention it to Victor.*

Then there was only the cool bright shining, red at the top, violet at the bottom, words pouring in, words pouring out, a cloudburst of questions and answers, as Dede learned everything Devore had ever known.

He woke to the sound of Dede's voice. He was slumped in a chair beside Roberta's bed, a hotel bed, standard issue: rusting iron frame scaly with repaintings. One of Dede's "kids" teethed on his hands and wrists; every time Devore so much as twitched, it bit him. Another was wrapped around Roberta's neck; it looked like a black silk choker.

"Just mind your p's and q's, Doc, and my darling won't pinch a bit. It's only till Milo gets here." She turned to Bill and pasted on a smile. "You left the note, right, Bill? Like I said to? At that Grass and Hoozis?"

"I sure did, Dede honey."

"Insurance. I wouldn't want to be waiting around for nothing, just in case my kid comes up goose eggs." She started to pace. "I'll call too." She smiled fiercely, nearly drooling. "I'll leave a phone message on the grass place machine—you got a machine there, don't you, Devore? My Milo will get here one way or the other." She paced back and forth across the room. Small as it was, she turned nearly as often as she stepped, but she seemed to notice nothing.

"I did what you said, Deeds." Bill took a comb from his pocket and pulled it through his hair. "I always do what you say, don't I? Who loves you, Dede?"

"You do, Bill. You do."

Devore rasped, "You've wasted your life, Dede. You won't get what you want from Milo. You want the wrong things."

"Don't try to hustle me. I know you backward and forward, Devore. I read you from inside."

"And I know you." Devore tried to edge closer, but his hands started to hurt. "Did you think it only went one way? I'm not your kids, Dede. I know you can't go on like this. You've got too much of a heart, Dede."

Dede stopped pacing. She shut her eyes and clenched her fists: Roberta grabbed at the black silk choker and screamed. Devore fell silent.

"But enough about me," Dede said to Devore. "Let's talk about my Milo, okay?"

Bill laughed. "Dede, you gotta let me borrow that collar sometime. I got guys I'd like to put it on."

"Leave Roberta alone," Devore said. "When you want me to shut up, tell me."

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Dede pushed her face in Devore's. "Shut up," she said. Bill laughed. Dede smiled, flounced up to him, and kissed him.

He peeled her off him. "I gotta stretch my legs."

"Don't say hello to nobody," Dede called after him. She seemed about to cry—then she became aware of Roberta and Devore's eyes on her. She glanced murder at them and fell into a blue study.

Half an hour later, he still hadn't come back. Dede looked out the window. "Talk to me, Roberta. You're my best friend, did you know that?" Roberta didn't say a word. "Come on, Roberta girl. This ain't no thang. You and me are gonna be tight again, like before." Roberta was silent.

"You know what really pisses me off?" Dede swung round to face Devore. "All that time I was messing with the stinking fur ball, and it wasn't even Milo. I found that out from you, in your indigo band, sucker. If I'd have known that before, I would have had my brother back years and years ago. I'd be all set up by now."

Dede opened her purse, took out a gun, and held it loosely in front of Devore. "Insurance. I'm all over goddam insurance. Louie Devore, meet Mr. Beretta. Mr. Beretta: Louie Devore. Mr. Beretta here is a .38 Special, and you should see what he can do to a pumpkin, let alone Cinderella. Milo might not remember me and all I've done for him. It might take a while to remind him, see? It might take everybody a while. Mr. Beretta will speed that up. He'll remind everybody how happy a family can be—I mean, until they re-experience it for themselves."

Devore said, "Dede. . . ," and Roberta gagged. Devore lowered his gaze.

"Dede, you can't. . . ."

"I only want you to talk about what I want you to talk about, understand?"

They drove in shifts down the Interstate from the Green Mountains to Pitston. Sylvie drove first. Victor and Milo sat on a foam pad in the back of Victor's ancient VW bus. Victor jabbered. "You never answered me about the dragon thing. Higher dimensions, hm?"

"I don't know a thing about that stuff."

"Listen to me, Milo. There's a Banach-Tarski for every higher dimension. So, theoretically, we could shift through, like, the fourth dimension—or higher. That what you did?"

"I don't think that was it. . . ."

Miles and miles later Victor was still holding forth, when Sylvie pulled over and climbed back through the paisley hanging. "Shut up and do some driving, will you?"

Curtained from Victor, Sylvie and Milo twined together. Love passed between them like blood pulsing between chambers of the heart.

"You shashas can't shapeshift the way I can," Milo whispered. He couldn't sleep at all. "It's up to me, Sylvie. It's really up to me."

"Don't do anything crazy. We've got to all work together. Do the math, like Devore taught us: discipline, little man. Stay on top of it. Sometimes it's okay to be foursquare, Milo. One . . . one . . . one . . ."

"I'm just going to do what we all decided. I'm going to stop her. I'm going to make her listen, really listen. She's my sister. She's alive. She's got to bend, if I can just make her listen."

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The bus slowed, pulled over, and stopped. Victor peeked through. "Your turn, Milo."

"What were you, Victor?" Sylvie whispered. "You were something, weren't you, you dope?"

"Fog," he said. "Just low fog curling everywhere. If anyone came near I'd feel the currents quick. . . . I'm not a dope."

From the mat, Sylvie held Milo's hand as he passed through the curtain. When she had to, she let him go. Victor crawled into the back and sat beside her, already nodding off. She stared into the darkness.

One . . . one . . . one . . .

Devore had taught her to breathe and count that way. He'd met her in the park doing *Echo and Narcissus,* her old puppet show. The old man liked the show; halfway through, he wandered close and peeked inside the puppet booth to see her at work.

In those days, occasionally, there being so many props to remember and to manipulate, and Sylvie being so lazy in the Memory and List Department, she would fudge. She would shasha her hand into Narcissus or shasha one shoulder into a missing backdrop.

Relax, sleep, you may need it, one . . . one . . . one . . .

Sylvie used to do things like that when nobody was looking. The way she grew up, ignored by her own parents, charming her way into other kids' families—kinder, richer, more cultivated families—she was always essentially a showman, an outsider. She didn't know her shasha-ing was odd until one day, at seven years old, someone saw her playing with a puppy whose tail was Sylvie's arm—and screamed. Sylvie had thought that everybody shasha-ed, but on the sly, like playing between one's legs.

Devore spied Sylvie shasha her right hand into Narcissus, but he didn't let on right away. He invited her to do a show at The Grass and Trees at a suspiciously high fee and for a very select audience. Far from home, she'd been sleeping in the park, in junked cars at the public market, and in hotels when she could afford it and if the owners didn't get too curious about her exact age. Sure, she told Devore, why not?

Maybe if you turned over onto your other side—shashas have so many sides to sleep on. . . .

But the shashas at The Grass and Trees put on a show for *her*—the Banach-Tarski. Devore tutored her in shasha mathematics. The numbers didn't do *him* much good; his rainbow hiccups were uncontrollable. But shasha math increased Sylvie's repertoire, and Devore gave her a sort of family. He taught her what she was.

She was like a daughter to the man, but she wouldn't move into his house for love or money. No, the floor at The Grass and Trees would do. Sylvie would be her own boss, come hell or high water.

One . . . one . . . one . . .

Better to have been a little yielding. Devore was a lonely man. Why hadn't she let him take care of her a little, let him be to her in earnest what he'd always been to her secretly, in her heart: a father?

The thought of Dede piggybacked on that bad thought: why hadn't she told anyone that Dede was alive? She had kept it secret in a corner of her mind, in the habitual place of childhood secrets, gathering power in the

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dark—at everyone's expense. Selfish. Blind. All the while Sylvie had told herself stories about how it was all for Milo's good. . . .

She woke up and realized that the bus wasn't moving. Victor slumped against a window, snoring. At odd intervals he winked into phantasms; where his body had been, a green mist would appear, or a houri, a dodecahedron, an amoeboid clump, a knot, or a hamburger. Almost at once, he would be Victor again. He slept the sleep of shashas.

Sylvie peeked through the paisley curtain. "Milo?" The front seat was empty. She crawled forward, then eased open the passenger side door—not to wake Victor—and crept out into the dark. They had left the Interstate and were on a farm-lined road just outside Pitston. "Milo?" Warm rain drizzled. Leaves rustled everywhere, as if the air were made of leaves and of pattering drops that runneled and hissed when a breeze puffed. "Milo?" She could not tell if the deep sound she heard was distant rolling thunder or an earthquake. She could not tell if she heard it with her ears or through her feet.

She padded across the slippery wet grass along the road. "Milo? Milo?" She blinked the rain from her lashes. A long curving phoenix feather caught a bit of moonlight in the trees a hundred feet away. Stupid Monkey. "Milo, stop playing around." The eyes glowed out at her, fire-red, flat and frontal, a monkey's eyes under the phoenix feather cap. The trees shivered, and Monkey was gone.

Sylvie ran and slid. She ducked among the trees after Monkey. She scrambled after his sound as branches snapped and water sprayed. "Dammit. Stop, Milo. It isn't funny. You tired? You want me to drive?"

In a small clearing near a dry creek bed the Monkey King leaned against his cudgel as if it were a walking stick. He folded his simian hands on its top and rested his chin on his knuckles. He tilted his head at Sylvie this way and that.

"Honestly, little man!" Sylvie's hair was pasted against her face. Her soaked shirt clung to her breasts and belly. Her calves were spattered with mud. "I don't know why I love you."

Monkey lifted the cudgel, swung hard, and knocked her square in the forehead. An explosion of light—then everything went black.

Red streaked like blood, green like bile, swirling down walls of mind. A painful drumming sensation resolved into the sound of rain. Before she remembered who she was, Sylvie heard Devore's voice, weak and rambling.

She shook herself. The pain became her head, and then her hand materialized, pressing against it, then her mouth, tongue, lungs, larynx: "Unnnh!" Sylvie opened her eyes—she had eyes. There was light, fuzzy at first. Just to squint dizzied her with pain. She was in Milo's lap. He was all around her, holding her, looking down at her, still half monkey. His eyes were big with compassion.

The fur pulled back into Milo's skin. His arms and torso shifted to human proportions. Sylvie sighed. "Milo, sweet Milo, what happened. . . ?" He became Milo—but then he was still changing, shrinking, shifting beyond Milo into something else. Sylvie rolled out of Milo's lap onto a wood-

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en floor. His bones squealed and popped out of his skin where the skin shrank more quickly than his skeleton. Slowest of all was Milo's face, or, rather, the membrane stretched over the front of his skull; the rest of him imploded and settled, but the face followed it down like the skin of a shrinking balloon. It folded hideously as it sank.

On the chair above her an ugly baby wheezed. Its flesh, ropes of coagulated blood, coiled and pulsed. For a moment, Sylvie could see nothing else. Deep within her, as if down a dry well, a voice whispered, *Stay awake.*

Dede lay on the bed with one leg slung over the side. She was gazing at her pinky ring. It sparkled in the tawdry hotel room light. She turned her hand, and rainbows spread from it like feathers, staining the walls red to violet. Out of the rainbows came the sound of Devore moaning.

Another woman was there, sitting on the floor with a silent trepidation that made Sylvie glance back at Dede for the source of it. In Dede's other hand was a small pistol.

"Shut up, Devore." Dede thrust her ringed hand into her pocket. "It gives me the creeps—and I've seen everything. Rainbows aren't supposed to sound so pathetic, are they?"

Seeing Sylvie stir, Dede turned to her. "So she's awake. Hiya, Moon and Stars. Long time, no see. I wanted my Milo, not you, but I guess you'll do. Honey to a bee, aren't you, beautiful? My Milo's going to come buzzing round any time now—literally, maybe."

Dede swung her other leg over the edge of the bed and stood up. "God, my legs ache. I shoulda ridden my kid here." She offered Sylvie a hand up. Sylvie, still dazed, took it and stood. "This is the chick who stole my fur ball, Roberta."

"It was just a fur ball," Sylvie drawled.

"Yeah. Now I know that. Funny how things work, ain't it? I guess I paid you back for boosting it though, didn't I?"

Sylvie set her jaw and tried to answer, but Dede took her hand out of her pocket and slapped her across the face. "I don't really give a shit. I can find him. He's my goddam brother. I can feel him. I can feel you too, shasha. Can you feel me feeling you?"

She could. Sylvie felt like a netted butterfly beating its wings against the cheesecloth, rubbing away its precious fine powder. Dede was operating her just as she operated Devore and the ugly baby. A part of her own rational mind had become unavailable to Sylvie. She could no longer formulate certain sequences of thoughts; they stopped mid-cadence, mid-premise, like a door opening to reveal a wall. The Banach-Tarski was ungettatable. It was as if the flow of experience had been throttled to a capillary bleed with Dede at the valve. Dede was straining to bend her further, but Sylvie, waking, resisted.

"You're not so tough," Dede said. "You're not so goddam pretty either. You got my brother in love with you, don't you? You're operating him, aren't you? Aren't you?" It was as if Dede, without touching Sylvie, had twisted her arm behind her back. She fell to her knees.

"Dede, f'rcrissakes," Roberta piped up, "why don'tcha leave the girl alone?"

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"You, you watch what you say to me, Roberta. You shouldn't talk to me that way. You're my only fucking friend, Roberta. You gotta be nice to me or I swear I'll shoot your brains out."

"Okay, Dede. Okay, like you said. I'm your friend. I'll keep my mouth shut. You don't have to do no shooting."

"You weren't doing nothing with Bill before he lammed out on me, were you? I mean, you didn't have no plans, right? Because if I find out you have some plans, then when I find that sucker, I'll blow both your brains out, and I'll feed 'em to my kids."

"You got nothing to worry about, Dede. I'm your friend. I don't care nothing about no Bill."

"He loves me, y'know."

"I know."

"Anyways, it's not gonna be two days before I have everything anybody ever wanted. I already got little Moon and Stars here. That other bozo Milo's got with him'll shit in his pants at the sight of me, and Milo'll walk on home to Big Sister. . . . Ouch!"

Dede's right hand, the hand with the pinky ring, jerked. "Ouch!" Violet light flashed, and Devore lay on the ground near Sylvie. The baby screamed; it leapt away trailing spittle and ichor.

"As long as I live, I will never get used to crap like this." Roberta looked away, twitching as if to vomit.

"Doc! What'd she do to you?" Sylvie scooted next to Devore. She reached under his shoulders and held his head up. Dede watched tight-faced.

He seemed shriveled, ancient, a hermit crab in something else's shell. Sylvie looked to Roberta, to Dede. "You've got to get a doctor. He's sick." Dede didn't move. Roberta, watching her, held still.

"I love you, Sylvie," Devore whispered, "I've loved all my shashas, but you've been a daughter to me, you know?"

"I know. I love you, doc."

"Take care of Milo. Don't be afraid. If anybody knows not to be afraid of death, Sylvie, we do, you know?" Devore smiled, and his head went limp in Sylvie's arms.

"Doc? Doc? Oh God, please . . . Doc?"

Dawn was near. Gray shapes materialized in the dirty window. It had rained, it had stopped, it had rained again. Now rain stuttered at the eaves. One loud robin could be heard over the rumble of street cleaners and the constant hiss of traffic breathing through the canyons of the city. Far away: a woodpecker.

"He dying? Jesus, I didn't do this." Dede glared at Sylvie, then at Roberta, daring them to accuse her. "He was old, is all. That's not my fault. Anybody regular, they would have taken it okay." She scooped an ugly baby into her arms and over her shoulder, as if to burp it—while she pinioned Sylvie with her eyes. Watching her cry.

"Sylvie was here. I feel it." Milo blinked rain from his eyes. Covered with mud and twigs, he parsed shadows in the gathering light.

"It's not your fault, Milo." Victor pushed through a thicket of wet whipping branches to join him.

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"I just stopped to take a leak. I heard her call my name. I came back, and she was gone. I'll lay odds Dede has her now. It's a lure. She only wants me, Victor. Then she'll let Sylvie go."

"Let's move, then, kiddo."

It's up to me, Milo kept thinking. He strode back to the bus and climbed into the driver's seat.

Victor climbed in beside him. "Just stay awake, little man."

All the way to Pitston, not one word: the click of the wipers and the backbeat of the rain.

Under the door and on the message machine at The Grass and Trees, the same words: "Your big sister loves you, Milo honey," and an address.

Milo and Victor threaded the alleys to Roberta's hotel. The rain bowed them, made them bunch their bones and watch the puddles. It was slow and invisible rain, cold needles on a gray smoky day.

"Plan?" Milo touched Victor's shoulder as they passed Jitsi's steamy windows.

"What plan? She's an operator. She's got Sylvie, maybe Devore. We just shasha her out of business, Milo. If she swims like a fish, we turn to a fish-hawk. If she slithers like a snake, we turn to a crane."

"Scissors, paper, stone."

"We stay awake."

"She beat Sylvie, Victor."

"There are two of us, Milo—and you're the king of the shashas, remember?"

"Right."

They came in sight of the hotel, blistered clapboard slick with rain, window shades the color of iodine. They approached it from behind, along the fence of a parking lot half reclaimed by crabgrass and dandelion. Milo stopped. Victor started to ask why, but the same feeling soon stopped him.

"Is that your sister?"

"It must be." Milo's arm lifted as if drawn, like a compass needle. He pointed to a window on the third floor at one end of a long fire escape landing. The shade was pulled down, but a ray leaked at the edge, lighting skins of drizzle.

Victor nodded. "She's strong. Feels like ptomaine and brain fever." He took a deep breath and huffed it out. "I may be sick—don't let it bother you."

"I won't. I'm going to reconnoiter. The window."

"Stay awake."

He had thought to shapeshift into a bird, a fly, or steaming rain, and press to Dede's casement, but suddenly it was like climbing against an avalanche. A strange aphasia. Milo merely walked on his two legs across the lot and up the fire escape to Dede's window. He leaned beside it in the chill rain and peeked and listened. He told himself, "I could change to anything, but I'm tired and I don't really need to, that's all."

Victor had to sit down on the wet bottom step of the fire escape and mind his breathing. "I'll be okay in a minute."

Flush to the clapboard, Milo peeked sidelong through Dede's window. If he pressed his cheek to the casement, he could see enough between the

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frame and the ragged edge of the shade to piece together everything else. Devore was there, slumped on the floor, baggier than ever, like a baked apple. Sylvie lay near him, her back to the window. She quivered as if weak with fever. Milo wanted only one thing: to break through the window and go to them, but he held still: one . . . one . . . one . . .

There was another young woman sitting near Devore—must be Roberta, a large-boned woman with oily black hair wearing a black silk choker—no, it was a *thing.* It had a field like a shasha's, but simpler, lower, all spit and claws.

"You okay, Louie?" Roberta was saying.

"No, I feel weak. I'm dizzy. I can't make one thought follow another, you know?"

"I'm sorry, Louie."

Then he recognized Dede, and he nearly fell in love. She was fretting over another of the *things,* a squid-like baby spitting up in her lap. She wiped its mouth. She hugged and hugged it. Eyes open, Milo dreamed that he was that baby, that Dede was tilting her head and saying sweet things to him, wiping Milo's mouth, kissing Milo. Dede's face was as deep in his memory as the womb he'd pushed out of. It was so deep that he could hardly see it; he felt it, rather. Through the pancake, the eyeliner, and the lip rouge, he felt Dede's skin as if it were his heart. He felt dizzy then, slipped back against a metal railing, and nearly fell—that woke him up.

Inside the room Dede narrowed her eyes and concentrated, turning her field of vision into a pointillist painting. She atomized her other senses, changing them all into something like taste, a field of prickling flavors. She scanned and licked the sensory field surrounding the room as a baby licks a new toy, mouthing it, gumming, turning and inspecting it against the inside of its lip. She stood. "Milo!" The *thing* rolled from her lap and puddled on the floor like corn starch clay.

Milo felt that he had turned to blood. His body was a gel oozing at the window casement. *I'm all worked up,* he thought, just as he had the day they took his big sister Dede away to Juvenile Hall. *I don't know what's gonna happen to me if you're gone. I could die, Dede. My mind could wander some time, and then I'd be gone for good.*

Dede stared blankly. She couldn't tell where he was or even what he was just now, but he was near. "That's right, Milo. Nobody can take care of you but me. . . . Just calm down." Then, as if in a trance: "Ten . . . nine . . . eight . . ."

It was like wetting his bed, Milo thought. You hold on and you hold on, but then, when you give up, it feels so warm and sweet. You just flow out into the dark, into the warm, and then you can breathe again, the pressure all gone.

"Stay awake, you dope."

Roberta stroked Devore's curly white hair. He seemed so old. His skin was loose, as if it would peel from his bones like a winding sheet.

Dede counted, ". . . five . . . four . . . three . . ."

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Milo didn't want to stay awake. He wanted his Dede. He hadn't meant to claw her that once. How sorry he felt for that. He owed Dede everything. *Dede's my coach. I'm her star.* He felt her counting for him just as she always used to. Three, two, one: it was like swirling down a plug hole into something warm and right, into Dede, in fact. Dede was warm and right.

"Stay awake, little man."

Dede's heart raced. She bit her lip—a thin stream of blood trickled down her chin, but she barely noticed. She was electric with glee, welcoming Milo into her psychic embrace, Milo, Milo, panacea, and now absolutely everything was going to be wonderful, Milo, honey, just this single synapse further into your big sister's warmth, come on, come on. . . .

Milo felt the wind ripple his liquid surface. He could drip through the window glass and pour into Dede's arms.

Devore rasped, "Stay awake."

The words struck him like a cold blast. *Stay awake,* Sylvie and Victor echoed, and others too, a chorus of shashas, *as many as the stars you see when you see stars, Milo,* Victor sang in his mind, *and just as ubiquitous.*

Milo was there. He was awake. He was Milo. He scrabbled down the fire escape as Victor scrabbled up. They met below the second floor landing and hurried down together. Victor wrapped an arm around Milo, and they huddled at the bottom of the fire escape, two mortals in the relentless rain.

"Shit." Dede slammed the window sash. He had been *there.*

She grabbed her Beretta, hit the catch, and inspected the magazine. Seven shots. Plenty. "You're pretty, Moon and Stars, aren't you? Well, you won't be so pretty in a couple of hours."

Victor retched. A first floor window opened, and a thick-necked man in a white T-shirt peered out, cursed in a foreign language, then slammed his window shut. Far away: heat lightning, then thunder.

"Your Dede's a powerhouse." Victor pulled himself to his feet.

"She's got Sylvie. And Dr. Devore. He's sick. I don't know what she did to him. There's another girl too, must be Roberta. She's tied up. And Dede has a gun—has anybody you know ever been shot? What happens when a shasha dies, Victor?"

"I don't think we can die. I don't think that can happen to a shasha. We're everything anyway. How could something like us ever stop being alive?"

"So where are all the shashas from the beginning of time? The hundred-year-olds, the thousand-year-olds, the hundred-thousand-year-olds?"

"We're standing among them. The grass and trees. There must be some way to solve this, Milo. We can't call in the cops—they'd put us all in the monkey house. I feel like Anaxagoras in his jail cell, trying to square the circle."

"This is really my problem," Milo said. "Dede's after me. I'm the one

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who has to work it out with her. She doesn't want to kill me, exactly. She wants me to kind of complete her. You should have felt her up there, like somebody with a big wound begging you to heal them." He looked down. "It's wrong, it's crazy, but, I mean, she's my sister."

"Dammit, Milo, we won't let her make you her Band-Aid."

"Dede's crazy, really crazy, but I think I could talk to her."

"All the shashas are with you, Milo. We're all inside one another, all of us who did the Banach-Tarski together. We're shasha brethren. There isn't a single bit of you, however small, that doesn't have a bit of me inside it."

"I'm going to make her hear me, Victor. I don't belong to anybody but me. I'm going in there. I'm going to walk right in through the front door, Victor, and I'm going to leave with Sylvie and the doctor."

"You really think you can?"

"Yes."

"You're the king of the shashas, Milo. I'll come with you."

They walked around to the front and entered through a once-ornate lobby fallen to dust and mildew, past an empty front desk and a slightly astonished woman on her knees with a bucket of ammonia water. They began to climb the stairs, but halfway to the first landing, Milo paused.

"What is it?"

"It's about the Banach-Tarski. I want to know about what you said before, about higher dimensions."

"You have to know this now?"

"She's strong, Victor. Anything I might be able to use, I want to know about it."

"It's just a theory."

"Tell me. . . ."

"I'll tell you while we go upstairs, Milo. Let's not stop moving. I'm afraid I won't be able to start again."

They climbed.

"Does it have to do with time, Victor? Is the fourth dimension time?"

"Yes, it is. The fourth dimension is time. Minkowski showed it. And Einstein. All those guys."

Pulling himself upward against a crushing gravity, Milo pronounced each word as if it were a spell. "What does that mean? It must mean something—for us shashas. I feel like it's something important for us. I just can't think what. Help me, Victor."

Victor shook his head. "Milo, for heaven's sake. . . ."

They had reached the second floor when Dede pushed through the third floor fire door into the stairwell. Sylvie and Roberta draggled behind, secured by her ugly babies. Dede looked down at Victor and Milo. She smiled. The Beretta hung from one finger by the trigger guard. It could have been an apple she'd been munching.

Milo froze. He could look nowhere but at her.

"The little guy's dead," Dede shouted. "Your guru is dead. I didn't do it, but I can't say I'm all choked up over it. I got Moon and Stars in here. She ain't in too good of a shape; I take credit for the split lip and one black eye."

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Devore dead. It hit Milo and Victor like a nightstick across the chest. They reeled, and Dede advanced, not her body but her mind. She cast her net over them.

"You slipped her once, Milo." Victor, fallen onto all fours a step below Milo, panted. "Stay awake."

Milo felt his sister strain. It cost her dear, netting them while trying to keep her kid gnashing its teeth at Roberta; Sylvie was netted too, Milo felt, and that was work for Dede to maintain. Her resources as an operator were stretched to the limit. Wouldn't that weaken her *things?*

Victor struggled to his feet. "Stay awake. Stay awake."

"I'll stay awake, Victor, don't worry. And so will you. I feel her *things* melting."

Dede trained the gun on Victor. "You bozo, you stay put. I just want my brother. Hi, Milo. Come on up here to Dede, Milo. God, I missed you, honey. I love you, Milo. Do you love me?"

"Tell me about time, Victor," Milo pressed him. *Don't let her get to you.*

"It's got a negative coefficient." He rasped the words as if they were his last. "It's not exactly the same as the other dimensions, but yes, it functions, the whole thing, spacetime, just like S^4. There's a Banach-Tarski on it. Milo . . ."

Dede lashed out again. She punched Milo's mind halfway back to infancy. "Dede! Dede!" he shouted. "I'm all worked up, Dede." After all these years it was all he could say to her. He was back in the nursery again with the cop ladies at the door taking his Dede away. *Come back to yourself. Stay awake.*

"I know you are, baby." She waved to him, holding the gun as lightly as if it were a rattle. "Leave that asshole behind and come to Dede, Milo."

It's up to me. "I just want you to hear me, Dede. I'm my own person, Dede." He moved toward her.

"I hear you, Milo. Of course, you're your own person, Milo honey." Then to Victor as he tried to pull himself up again: "Stay put, you shit. You think this thing is a squirt gun? I'll kill you dead."

Sylvie screamed, "Milo, get away."

Without taking her eyes off Milo and Victor, Dede grabbed Sylvie's arm. But something distracted her. Something was sliming into Dede's hair. It oozed down. She reached up to poke at it with her gun hand, but Roberta grabbed her wrist.

"Here's your kid, Dede." It was Roberta who had put the slime there; it dripped down from her hand. With a *thwuck*, she pulled her hand out of the goo that was all that remained of Dede's ugly baby, and then she pushed it down into Dede's eyes. "Like you and the doc, sweetums—I didn't do this, but I can't say I'm all choked up over it."

Dede twisted her hand free and fired off two shots. Roberta fell first. She slumped against Dede. Her switchblade tumbled from her hand. She slid down Dede's side to her knees, then fell flat. Sylvie wobbled uncertainly for a moment before she collapsed.

"Stay awake. Stay awake, Milo." Victor's voice trembled with terror. But Milo was no longer beside him. "Milo?" His eyes fluttered, knees like rubber. "Milo . . ."

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* * *

One . . . one . . . one . . .

The doctor dead. Moon and Stars crying, crawling, then falling, shot.

Stay awake, little man.

Dede says, *I love you, Milo. Do you love me?* And then: *I'll kill you dead.*

Concentrate, Milo. Concentrate harder than you have ever concentrated before. Shashas are dying. *I've got to save them.* But to do that, you need to shift deeper than even Devore could imagine, to a place that Victor could calculate but never see.

Remember Sylvie's old puppet show? Didn't Stone Monkey jump down into Hell once to erase his name from Yama's register, the register of Death? That's what you have to do, only not into Hell—into S^4, four-dimensional space. There's a Banach-Tarski on it; Victor said so, and that means that a shasha can shift there.

But not just any shasha—only me . . .

In S^4, you'd see time, the fourth dimension, right along with the regular three. Every moment would be like a bug in amber. You'd see a thing's history all at once: where it came from and where it's going, just the way folks in S^3 can see its height, length, and width.

Peer into S^4, Milo, into the ticking works of the world. It's the shift of all shifts. Feel yourself vanish. Victor is calling, "Milo. . . !" He looks so funny standing there unsteadily, staring at a spot where you, Milo, no longer are.

Because you are everywhere, Milo. You shift into S^4; it's startling how easy it is. You almost smile. It's like a polliwog shaking off the last bits of a tail, then crawling onto land and, for the first time, breathing air.

Suddenly there isn't a thing to worry about. All your terrors are like little frames on a movie reel: Devore dies, Sylvie is shot, Dede says, "I love you, Milo. Do you love me?" You see it all, frame by frame, past and future, as if all of time were already finished. Here in S^4 all of time is already finished.

But there must be dimensions greater than the fourth. There must be, for how else could you be shifting deeper still? You are diving, diving. Your whole life as Milo is a bubble, one of a trillion bubbles tickling your shasha skin.

Your ears are thunder, your eyes are lightning, and on your tongue are all the words that ever have been spoken or ever will be spoken. Space and time explode in a searing flash—and you find yourself in S^5, five dimensions. From here old S^4 looks like a game of checkers. You can play with the moments themselves, push them about, lift them through the fifth dimension and plunk them down on another square. There is Devore's death. There is Dede slapping Sylvie. And there are the deaths of your whole shasha family, each death in its moment, like checkers, red and black.

Now you see it: S^5, the five-dimensional beast. The shashas are quivers in its five-dimensional skin. *Look,* Milo. Try to shift. Maybe from here in the deeper world you can perform a Banach-Tarski over all of space and time. Maybe you can reshape something and save your friends' lives.

Stay awake.

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Like a puppet who has discovered that he is really the hand inside, you feel yourself to be the vast thing whose quivers turn to shashas. Can you do one small thing, move one small checker? Can you give Devore, Roberta, and Sylvie their lives back? Recede into the earth, Milo. There. It takes a Herculean effort. You've never felt a pain like this one, a pain bigger than your whole world put together could feel, a pain in more dimensions than anybody but you could see. Hold on. Stay awake.

I will.

Pull the poisonous fingers back into the earth.

Look: it's happening. Down in S^3 something changes. Each swallowed soul, gasping and blinking, is disgorged. Stone Monkey has erased three names from Death's register.

Now you linger over the serpent's tail of Dede's life. Whatever bend you tweak will deform a dozen others. Something told you this would be so—that's why you left it for last. Love is simple, whatever people say. Kindness is simple. Selflessness is simple—the common measure of earth and sky. But Dede—perhaps you could pull straight her convolutions, temper her hardness, prune her like a gnarled tree, but she resists. A life like Dede's has its own gravity. Its solution lies deeper than you can shift.

Spent, you can do no more. You drift back through S^5, S^4, S^3, toward the everyday world.

Dede still scrapes goo from her forehead and squeezes off two shots. Roberta falls. Sylvie wobbles, then slumps down. Blood streams down Dede's chest. She stares in horror at Roberta's switchblade, wet with blood, lying at her feet. She drops the Beretta and touches her neck, then looks at her fingers, all bloody. The goo becomes a dustball—what it used to be—soaks up blood, and sticks between Dede's fingers.

Victor turns toward you, but you are gone. Then, out of nowhere, you are running up the stairs shouting, "Sylvie! Sylvie!"

"Worry about yourself, little man." Sylvie winced. A bullet had grazed her right bicep. "I'm indestructible, didn't you know? I'm in show business."

Roberta lifted herself to her feet hand over hand along the banister. The cloth on her stomach was stained red. "Mummy's coming, Lydia. Mummy's fine. We're gonna be a goddam family again."

"You'd better sit down." Victor grasped her forearm and guided her down again; she didn't resist.

Milo kneeled over Sylvie as she propped herself up on one arm. "I'm okay," she said.

There was a body slumped behind Milo. *Don't turn around. Don't look. Don't even think of it—what is Dede now? A molting lizard's tail, broken draggling scales, dead memories? Don't think of Dede. Don't turn around. Don't look.*

"Milo, Milo . . ." Victor stared at him with a vague perplexity.

Milo nodded. "It was me. You were right. I did a Banach-Tarski on S^4. Only, I couldn't save Dede."

Victor locked eyes with him. "Milo, I'm sorry."

At last Milo looked at Dede, at the inert lump of her. For an instant his

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ears were thunder and his eyes were lightning again. He saw through Dede, not to the floor but to all the moments before and after, the checkerboard of S^4, back to the girl, to the baby, to the seed, and forward to the grass and trees.

Up and down the stairwell, doors opened and echoed. Footfalls sounded in hallways above and below. Faces flashed over the banister—Roberta gave them all a finger and the evil eye. "The cops'll be here pretty soon, but don't worry: it's Dede's own bullet in her, and I know how to handle cops. Hey—you think there'll be room for a tattooed lady and her little girl in your grass and trees?"

"Room and to spare," Sylvie said.

A faraway look crossed Milo's face. "You have no idea."

"You're Milo, huh?" Roberta said. "You'll be my Lydia's Uncle Milo. She'll call you daddy, though, at first. She calls all the guys daddy, big and small. She don't care what shape."

Sylvie touched Milo's cheek, and he had to hug her. Victor kneeled close.

"Ah, you take the cake." Roberta shook her head. She almost thought they were glowing. "You grass and trees. You really take the cake." She closed her eyes and could hardly help smiling. A hint of violet light had spilled through her lashes and made her happy. "Hey, but what about the doc, Milo? Did Dede's net really kill him? Or is he off the hook too? Is he alive?"

Violet, then indigo, spilling around the third floor fire door, coalesced—and Louis Devore shambled into the stairwell. Sylvie stood to embrace him. "Doc, thank God. We thought you were finished."

Devore shook himself. "Not yet." He narrowed his eyes at Milo. "You've seen something, haven't you? Later on, you'll have to tell me all about it, yes?"

His eyes fell on Dede then, and he paused. "Dead?"

"Dead," said Milo. "Dead, alive, and everything else. Like the grass and trees." O

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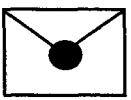

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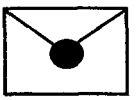

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ON BOOKS

Paul Di Filippo

Stan the Man

As I write this, I'm still suffused with a golden glow from two viewings of Sam Raimi's fine and affecting film, *Spider-Man*. Seeking to understand and, yes, even prolong the buzz, I turn to *Excelsior! The Amazing Life of Stan Lee* (Fireside Books, trade paper, $14.00, 246 pages, ISBN 0-684-87305-2), written by Stan Lee and George Mair, and am not disappointed. This anecdote-stuffed memoir from Spidey's co-creator, a book that's a close cousin to Julius Schwartz's *Man of Two Worlds* (2000), captures the excitement of the early sixties, when Lee and his co-workers were—half unwittingly, half calculatedly—turning the comics industry on its head, and providing magnificent reading pleasures for such youngsters as myself, pleasures that would compost into a rich store of future nostalgia. But Lee's "bio-autography"—a term he fashions to describe the mix of third-person and first-person narration from Mair and himself—does not focus exclusively on the sixties. It's a full-fledged account of Lee's whole life, and the Silver Age occurs only halfway through, followed by the less-well-known developments of subsequent decades. Yet all of it is nearly as interesting as the heyday stuff.

The book opens with an introduction cast as a segment of the famous "Stan's Soapbox" column. While it's a treat to encounter Lee's quintessential hyperbolic style once again, I worried about the effect of reading an entire book in this mode. But Lee drops the over-the-top alliterative stylings for a more conversational, less strained prose that is pure pleasure to read. (I devoured this book in two sittings.)

The arrangement of the material here is strictly chronological, so we see Lee first as a young child, then as a teenage employee of Timely Comics, circa 1940, working side by side with Jack Kirby and other Golden Age masters. We watch his personal and artistic lives develop side by side, through the wartime forties and Wertham fifties, until he's nearing forty years old and despairing of achieving anything in the comics field of lasting value. Then in a devil-may-care moment comes the creative explosion that resulted in the Fantastic Four, the Hulk, Spider-Man, Daredevil, Thor, the X-Men, and dozens of other indelible characters. From here, the ride is a tad less dramatically epic, although the mysterious failure of Stan Lee Media, the bankruptcy and recovery of Marvel Comics, and the creation of Lee's latest venture, POW! Entertainment, provide plenty of interest.

What comes across most strikingly in this book is Lee's forgiving, jovial personality and his devotion to his chosen artform. If ever a man was in love with his work, Lee is that lucky fellow. His legendary

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Bullpen antics are just the most extreme instance of a receptive nature that allowed him to tap into some collective subconscious realm and write endless scripts without blockage or constraint. Lee is candid about various professional misunderstandings—his fallings-out with Kirby and Steve Ditko—but generously buries all hatchets. His optimism and good humor are a shining counterexample to all the mopey and disaffected *artistes* who have accomplished barely a fraction of Lee's track record.

Buy this book, Pilgrim! 'Nuff said!

Harlan Ellison Will Come to Your Living Room Tonight

Stan Lee mentions his friendship with Harlan Ellison in his biography, allowing us to segue nicely to Ellison's own work: specifically, his vibrant, exciting audio recordings, available from The Harlan Ellison Recording Collection at POB 55548, Sherman Oaks, CA 91413.

An accomplished showman and reader, capable of single-handedly spinning soundscapes that conjure up bright, cinematic mindshows, Ellison invests his readings with much emotion, energy and love. (Small sound effects and minimal music abet his efforts.) Precisely intoned and timed, his readings are perhaps the most authentic way of fully experiencing his kick-ass stories.

A Boy & His Dog (Warner Audio, 2 cassettes, $14.95, ISBN 0-87188-118-7) also includes " 'Repent, Harlequin!' Said the Ticktockman." Ellison's voice seems youngest here, less roughened with the years, and he tears into his savage, post-apocalyptic tale of Blood and Vic with glee.

These same two tales, along with seven others, can be found on *The Voice from the Edge, Volume 1: I Have No Mouth and I Must Scream* (Dove Audio, 4 cassettes, $25.00, ISBN 0-7871-2266-1). I was particularly gratified to find here one of my favorite early Ellison stories, the touching "The Very Last Day of a Good Woman."

A newer installment of *The Voice from the Edge* series is *Midnight in the Sunken Cathedral* (Fantastic Audio, 5 CDs, $25.00, ISBN 1-57453-415-7). Eleven tales—all enterable at different points thanks to each being composed of many tracks—mix the tragic with the humorous, from the title piece to the Runyonesque "S.R.O."

And of course we also get Ellison's trademark nonfictional asides, ranging from musings on why some stories achieve renown when better ones don't, to how mortality tangles with art.

The interaction of Ellison's unique voice with his printed prose is a treat not to be missed.

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Kathe Koja's first book since her short-story collection *Extremities* (1998), is (perhaps surprisingly, given Koja's transgressive predilections) a Young Adult novel. But rest assured that Koja's toughness of mind and vision, as well as her hard-edged storytelling panache, remain intact. *Straydog* (Farrar, Straus & Giroux, hardcover, $16.00, 106 pages, ISBN 0-374-37278-0) reminds me of a twenty-first-century version of one of my own favorite childhood books, Emily Neville's Newbery Award-winner *It's Like This, Cat* (1963). Neville's book focused on a sensitive teen whose only confidante was his pet. It dealt with topical issues in an urban setting. Koja's heroine, Rachel Hawthorne, is similarly isolated in the cage of her wounded intelligence, but her backyard is suburban and her angst is configured according to high-school cliques. Moreover, the object of her desperate affections is no purring pussycat but a feral caged collie who rejects all her advances.

Seeking to penetrate the mind and thus the heart of the abused animal, Rachel turns an essay assignment into a recreation of the dog's putative stream-of-consciousness. Koja provides solid extracts of this work, rendering the non-human POV tangibly alien. As Rachel seeks to rehab the collie she names Grrl, she finds herself opening up to another outsider, a transfer student named Griffin. The two loners enter into a conspiracy of hope, one which will unfortunately run up against the exigencies of the adult world.

Rachel's first-person narration is believably that of a talented adolescent, half naïve, half sophisticated. (Although an allusion to Shiva seemed to me to cross the line into the more mature consciousness of the author.) Her insights into the tedium of adult responsibility and the unthinking callousness of her peers provoke rueful laughter. And her emotional reaction to the climactic setback is all too heartbreakingly real. But while there are no pat solutions to Rachel's problems, growth and accommodations round out this tale.

Koja has fun with an offstage figure, a famous author named Susan Jardine, whose books bear such titles as *On the Matter of My Suicide*. Is this a sly depiction of the "old Koja," meant to contrast with the innocence of budding writer Rachel? Whether or not this interpretation is correct, both old and new Koja fuse into a glorious whole in this heartfelt novel for readers of any age.

Lucius Shepard is one of SF's rare poets, producing stories bejeweled on a line-by-line level that crescendo in emotional fireworks. There's simply no more accurate description for the intensity or craft behind his writing. And like other famous SF poets—Bradbury, Sturgeon, Delany—Shepard most often turns his attention to affairs of the heart. And never has his focus on the labyrinths of love and despair been more concentrated than in his latest novel, *Valentine* (Four Walls Eight Windows, hardcover, $18.00, 181 pages, ISBN 1-56858-215-3).

Valentine is the straightforward, gut wrenching story of a few isolated, sex-wracked days in the lives of a man and a woman. Russell and Kay were lovers once. Then Kay returned to her joyless marriage. Six years of noncommunication have passed when the two accidentally

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meet while on separate business trips during hurricane season in the honky-tonk town of Piersall, Florida. There, cut off from their normal lives, they will immerse themselves in an erotic haze while rehashing their pasts and speculating on their futures.

Meticulously sexy, this tale is imbued with stefnal and surreal and fantastical imagery, while still remaining anchored in the glories and mud of the quotidian. From the long opening paragraph that speaks of "countries that exist only for a matter of days" to the final riff on the nature of the strange event that isolated Piersall from the rest of the world, Shepard colors his tale with extraordinary metaphors that serve to highlight the very real corporeal and mental tensions. Cast as a Valentine's Day letter to Kay, the first person narration also exhibits formalistic innovation in Russell's constant use of the second-person when addressing his absent lover.

Like Bertolucci's *Last Tango in Paris* (1972), *Valentine* is an unflinching dissection of two souls under a microscope whose lenses are quivering slices of human heart.

Like his artistic role model, William Gaddis, Carter Scholz produces new books only at longish intervals. But his offerings are certainly worth the wait: immaculately crafted, intelligent and sprightly, despite a certain gravitas. Miraculously, we are currently gifted with two Scholz publications, a novel and a shared story collection. Additionally, a solo story collection is due out soon. This could mark a new era in Scholzian abundance.

Radiance (Picador USA, hardcover, $24.00, 388 pages, ISBN 0-312-26893-9) is Scholz's masterpiece to date, a formalistically daring and conceptually rich book, whose central themes and topics pertain intimately to the core beliefs of science fiction about how science and society intersect. The multivalent title refers, primarily, to a certain project underway at an immense West Coast nuclear weapons lab that employs thousands of scientists and other workers. But the heavenly radiance within matter and within the troubled souls of the protagonists weighs fully as heavily in the ultimate balance.

Our initial protagonist is Philip Quine, a leader on the Radiance project. Quine is troubled by various lies and subterfuges, most of them perpetrated by Leo Highet, the Lab's director. As his troubled relationship with a woman named Nan falls apart, Quine must deal not only with the moral issues involved with his job but with his growing romantic attraction to an anti-nuke protestor named Lynn. In a major confrontation with Highet, Quine and his principles seem to go down to defeat.

We next ride Highet's shoulders, learning more about the Lab's tangled past and conspiratorial future, and also discovering that he is not quite the ultimate bastard Quine believed him to be. As Highet in his turn crashes and burns in a controversy, Quine's star reascends, and the final third of the book finds him heading the Lab as interim director, as all the paper and literal fallout descends on his head. His ultimate stand against the madness achieves a small victory, but leaves larger wagers still at stake.

This small synopsis barely limns the intricate web of deceit, avarice,

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idealism, realpolitik and scientific folly that Scholz has constructed, buttressed by scrupulous research and enlivened by a *roman à clef* feel. Like Thomas Pynchon, Scholz revels in Machiavellian plots of world-altering complexity, and his narrative swoops and swerves excitingly. Miraculously, most of the information is conveyed in brilliant stretches of painfully verisimilitudinous dialogue. Capturing the way we actually speak and the authentic streams of consciousness of the characters, Scholz and his text function as a kind of multisensory camera on events. His tactics marvelously crystallize not only the psyches of the characters but the quintessential modern landscape they inhabit.

With its roots spreading throughout sixty years of weapons research, politics and civilian Cold War insanity, a milieu we have just barely escaped alive, this novel is the first authentic portrait of the era just ended to emerge in either mainstream or science fiction.

The five stories in *Kafka Americana* (W. W. Norton, trade paper, $11.00, 100 pages, ISBN 0-393-32253-X), by Scholz and Jonathan Lethem (two solo efforts apiece, and one collaboration), arrive with genre pedigrees, having appeared in such publications as *Crank!* and *Starlight*. But their presentation here, from such a prestigious firm, is decidedly mainstream, and speaks of an attempt to lure readers more familiar with Kafka than with Lethem and Scholz.

Scholz's contributions are "Blumfeld, an Elderly Bachelor," in which a nebbishy accountant crosses the border of insanity, and "The Amount to Carry," where a meeting between Kafka, poet Wallace Stevens, and composer Charles Ives manages to chart many currents of the twentieth century. Lethem's "The Notebooks of Bob K." transfigures Kafka into Batman, while "K Is for Fake" turns the life of big-eyed-waif painter Walter Keane into an existential nightmare. The joint effort, "Receding Horizon" is a uchronia in which an émigré Kafka ends up in Hollywood as Frank Capra's favorite screenwriter.

When conjuring up such pastiches, a writer must master not only the style of his model, but also that model's typical fictional concerns. When you factor in the usage of the model as a character in the fictions, then you also have to bone up on the famous person's whole life. It's a demanding form when done well, and Scholz and Lethem are up to the task. Anyone half-conversant with Kafka's life and works will find many resonances here, provoking both laughter and tears. And these authors' talents blend seamlessly in the collaboration, which they manage to turn into a metafictional romp. Unless you're a masochistic hunger artist or strapped beneath a flesh-inscribing machine, you'll dash out of your underground burrow to purchase this book.

Is it possible that a Secret History of the Cuban Missile Crisis exists, and that such an account would reveal that the world was spared from Armageddon only by the self-sacrifice of a minor Russian poet in exile? Such is the core conundrum of John Crowley's *The Translator* (William Morrow, hardcover, $24.95, 295 pages, ISBN 0-380-97862-8), and, as one might suspect from Crowley's past books,

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this conceit is clad in subtle shadows tinted with melancholy and exuberance, appearing and disappearing as the diaphanous curtains of his elegant prose shift and waver. All is told aslant, and multiple narratives enfold the ostensible main history.

On first glance, matters appear forthright. This meandering, leisurely paced novel will be something of a *bildungsroman*, the story of a young woman named Christa "Kit" Malone, a name meant surely to echo Christopher "Kit" Marlowe, an iconic symbol of poetry's not altogether salubrious enrapturing effects. We will follow her from preadolescence to her forced blossoming into adulthood during her first two years at college and her eventual affair with Innokenti Isayevich Falin, a Russian poet exiled by Khrushchev. We see the formation of Kit's character, especially in her close relationship with her brother Ben. Between them they like to conjure up an elaborate fantasy life about imaginary countries (an important theme throughout the text), and soon Kit develops into a budding poet, eventually winning an award for her work. But only prolonged romantic and professional contact with the enigmatic and self-contained Falin will reveal to Kit what poetry really demands and entails from its practitioners. As political events spin out of control around them, Kit and Falin work on engineering English versions of his poems. Kit seems to be the translator alluded to in the title, but by book's end we will see that Falin has really been a more important translator of a different sort.

Crowley skips around adeptly through time, employing a frame sequence that concerns the adult Kit's contemporary visit to Russia, where she learns some posthumous facts about Falin, and delivers some revelations of her own to his elderly friends. In the historical sections, Crowley's flair for evoking dead eras through telling details serves him well, as he puts us smack dab in the middle of the paranoia and vanished cultural constraints and concerns of the early sixties.

Unfortunately, the affair at the heart of the book comes off as too marmoreal to deeply engage us. While Kit is a fully inhabited character, something about Falin's depiction prevents us from ever feeling close to him or his plight. Close-mouthed and mysterious by design—his own and the author's—Falin is also rather too noble to reveal any cracks by which we might enter his inner psyche. Thus the trysting between Kit and Falin seems one-sided, and less than satisfying. And by the time that global politics come to dominate the narrative, any chance that the relationship will explode into erotic fireworks is doomed.

As always with Crowley, his mystical apparatus—involving greater and lesser "national angels"—is superbly deployed, lending this slice of historical recreation the air of a doomed fable.

Paul La Farge, Nicholas Christopher, Mark Helprin—three magical realists who have revivified old-fashioned storytelling virtues with postmodern sensibilities. These three authors and others from the canonical mainstream have nothing, however, on such homegrown wonders as our own Jeffrey Ford. Ford's latest, *The Portrait of Mrs.*

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Charbuque (William Morrow, hardcover, $24.95, 310 pages, ISBN 0-06-621126-3), is a steampunkish mystery dealing with issues of identity and art, revenge and mysticism, in utterly captivating fashion. Although nothing definitively supernatural occurs in Ford's tale—all explanations are ultimately suspect, multivalent—he's produced one of those Mervyn-Peakeish books where the cumulative effect of the "mundane weirdnesses" (if such an oxymoron is permissible) raises the book to levels of extraordinary fantasy.

In late-Victorian New York, the portrait artist Piambo seems to be on top of the world, lauded by his patrons whose commissions afford him a fine living. But Piambo's large talents are being wasted in painting the idle rich, and he knows it. Thus, when an odd commission for an enormous, life-altering sum is offered him—to paint the portrait of a woman, the enigmatic Mrs. Charbuque, without ever seeing his subject—Piambo accepts, with a mixture of excitement and trepidation. Piambo does not know that this commission is a deathtrap that has claimed many of his peers. A trap that will kill his talent, and possibly his very self. As Piambo pursues the numinous image of Mrs. Charbuque based on her voice alone, abandoning his actress lover Samantha, abetted by his fellow, opium-smoking artist Shenz, he finds himself ensnared in the woman's tragic, neurotic charade.

Ford conveys Charbuque's lifestory in the form of her oral accounts delivered from behind a screen to Piambo. Reminiscent of a fusion of Italo Calvino's fables and the cliff-hangers of *A Thousand and One Nights*, these accounts are wisely interspersed with plenty of action outside the cloistered sitting room. A serial killer whose MO is a gory one is abroad in the city, and this thread will eventually be knotted to Piambo's own lifeline.

Ford offers us drollery, suspense, cognitive estrangement, and a vivid immersion in the Gilded Age. His short, compulsively readable chapters are a kind of pointillistic assault on his subject, engendering a landscape with figures that are apprehendable only when the viewer steps back—a distancing move Piambo himself must learn to make.

At one point, Piambo, distraught on the streets, feels himself to be "trapped in a net of gazes, a thick web of stares." This shamanic power of seeing and capturing the essence of a person's soul and the soul of the world as well is what Ford himself possesses.

(See below for an account of Ford's new story collection.)

Only An Aylett

Thank heavens for Steve Aylett! When besieged by solemnity and juiceless "fine writing," feeling one's brain is about to explode from lack of serious fun, any reader can turn to Aylett's phantasmagorical word-explosions disguised as "novels" and find the needed antidote to all the well-intentioned drudge-sludge pumped forth by the more timid members of the SF establishment. Anarchic Aylett is, I've just realized, our own Salvador Dali, not even so much for any similarity in surreal effects (although there's lots of shared imagery and angle of attack between the men),

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but for their conjoint role as mad geniuses bewailing the barriers of spacetime.

Aylett has three books out as I write, praise be! The first is a novella, *Shamanspace* (Codex, trade paper, £6.99, 121 pages, ISBN 1-899598-20-0), in which Aylett is a tad more weighty and even perhaps despairing than is his wont. But certainly the subject matter deserves and invokes such treatment. Rival esoteric organizations—the Prevail and the Internecine—are determined to assassinate God, for His myriad crimes against humanity. Slipping through mysterious dimensions in the manner of Doctor Strange, the assassins hurl themselves at the heart of God, seeking to poison, lacerate, or otherwise discommode the deity. One drawback: since God is woven into the very fabric of the universe, killing Him might very well result in the evaporation of the cosmos.

But our hero, Alix, has no compunctions about his mission. On the verge of launching an assault with great potential for ultimate destruction, Alix is kidnapped by the Prevail. Will he be rescued? Is his own organization, the Internecine, all it seems? Alix would like to know as much as you, since his future depends on the answers!

Of course, aside from the pure outrageous story, the main attractions of Aylett's book are the inebriated language and the aphorisms. Both are here in plenty. "Truth was the stone in the snowball." "Say which exists and which doesn't—the gallows, harmony, yourself." "I raised an arm toward it, the funhouse-mirror limb stretching to infinity, and let it draw the rest of me into subspace like an elastic band. The room started to funnel, and I gained a sense or two, then blurred through a wedding arch of cobalt flame." If these tidbits don't draw you into this hallucinatory tale of mortal versus immortal, then you're not on the side of the angels.

In *Only an Alligator* (Victor Gollancz, trade paper £9.99, 133 pages, ISBN 0-57506-906-6), the first book of a quartet, Aylett reverts to the kind of deadpan, fecund hyper-comedy on exhibit in his previous books—but with a slight difference, an upgrade so to speak. Here Aylett's wacky society actually seems to cohere for the first time into a semi-functional unit. Unlike the haphazard, disjointed lives of the citizens of Beerlight, Aylett's older venue, the lives of the inhabitants of his new city, dubbed Accomplice, actually dovetail and support one another. There's a mayor, politics, boring jobs, café life—all the essentials that make up the modern urban experience. This means that we are more firmly grounded in the day-to-day existence of the characters, so that when the many, many weirdnesses occur (and believe, me, weirdness still predominates over "normality"), our empathy is heightened.

Accomplice is a kind of Oz in miniature, as we can see in the amusing map that serves as frontispiece. It's bounded on four sides by various barriers, giving it a hermetic quality that has driven its citizens inward on themselves. The fact that the city is underpinned by a demon realm, *á là* some conceit of Richard Calder's, only adds to the realm's precarious stability.

Our hero, Barny Juno, a simple lover of "the winged and stepping animals of the earth," has offended Sweeney, a large beetle-shaped demon, by stealing Sweeney's next

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meal, an alligator steeped in mystic vibes. Sweeney, with the assistance of a lesser demon named Dietrich, will spend the rest of the novel attempting to retrieve his alligator. His methods will include direct assault and vilification of Barny, and culminate in Sweeney's shattering visit aboveground. Meanwhile, Barny's friends, Edgy and Gregor, have problems of their own, not the least of which is Gregor's romantic fixation on dinosaur skeletons. Add in various wild girlfriends, daft museum keepers, angry bosses, grasping Gubba Men, and you have a rich stew of unwholesome yet addictive meats.

The second book in the Accomplice quartet, *The Velocity Gospel* (Victor Gollancz, trade paper £9.99, 131 pages, ISBN 0-57507-088-9), has less of a linear plot (as if the first had much) but is equally as diverting and startling. Sweeney the Demon still has a grudge against Barny and this time sends a lesser demon named Scattermite as his agent. Mayor Rudloe, meanwhile, has conceived a hatred against all voters who thwart his simple ambitions of getting rich through chicanery. Gregor has transferred his lusts from dinosaur skeletons to some automatons in a clock tower. Edgy is attempting to interest Feeble Champ Press in publishing a book of poems by his girlfriend. And Barny is flummoxed over how to ditch his old lover, Magenta Blaze, in favor of a new interest, the museum-keeper's daughter Chloe Low. What could have been an episode of *Friends* in lesser hands turns into a slapstick comedy scripted by Mark Leyner, Buster Keaton, and S.J. Perelman.

Well, I could trot out dozens of incidents and conversations and landmarks from Accomplice that would have you rolling on the floor with laughter, but suffice it to say that you have encountered nothing this funny since Firesign Theater's collaboration with Damon Runyon and R.A. Lafferty. What? You don't know that famous performance? Then you're not living on Accomplice's bandwidth!

Small Press Titles

Donald Grant is one of the oldest and most prestigious of small publishers in the areas of science fiction, fantasy, and horror. For many years ensconced in my native state, Rhode Island, the firm is now located at 19 Surrey Lane, POB 187, Hampton Falls, NH 03844, or in virtual reality at <*www.grantbooks.com*>. Known for the superb quality of their books, Grant produces volumes that almost instantly soar into the stratosphere of collectibility. Two new publications are doubtlessly destined for this same glorious fate.

Goad: The Many Moods of Phil Hale (hardcover, $29.99, 164 pages, ISBN 1-880418-48-7) is a sumptuous art book featuring photos, drawings, cut-ups and oil paintings by this disturbingly talented artist. Hale's menacing mechanisms depict obscure devices for either torture or measurement of the incommensable. The contorted faces and arthritic hands of his punk mechano-assassins convey a Henry Rollins amplitude of rage and frustration. Yet underneath the sordid despair is a kind of grim humor. Hale's ironical stance has him labeling the image of a cyborg who's cratering his own head with a

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weapon-arm "maintaining." And a photo of a naked man and naked woman inspecting the man's cactus-sized tongue is blithely titled "cosmonauts." From his arresting book-jackets to his deracinated collages, Hale is a prophet of unease.

The very first book published under the Grant imprint in 1964 and now re-issued was *A Golden Anniversary Bibliography of Edgar Rice Burroughs* (slipcased hardcover, $100.00, 428 pages, ISBN 1-880418-51-7). The original now commands in the vicinity of $600.00 on the market, so this new edition represents a real bargain. Assembled by Dr. Henry Hardy Heins, this tribute to the fervor inspired by ERB's creations is no mere dusty listing of printings. Instead, Heins has included numerous ancillary materials and incorporated many fascinating tidbits of Burroughsiana. From original advertisements and reviews to a list of all the dedications ERB made; from a complete portfolio of ERB-related artwork by J. Allen St. John to correspondence with Burroughs's heirs; from the full scoop on the "Tarzan Clans," an abortive fan club, to reprints of essays by ERB himself—this volume offers endless hours of fascination for anyone who has ever fallen under the spell of Tarzan or John Carter. In conjunction with a good biography of ERB—say, John Taliaferro's *Tarzan Forever* (1999)—this book will give you the full scoop on the amazing Mr. Bean.

Shamefully, American SF readers know relatively little of what their brethren abroad are up to. To a large extent, this ignorance is explainable by the unavailability of work by foreign authors in English. But when English-language editions are made available in excellent translations, then it seems to me we have a duty to read—and indeed can reap much pleasure from reading—the ofttimes splendid work of our non-English-speaking speculative kindred. Case in point today is the work of Zoran Zivkovic. Zivkovic hails from what was once called Yugoslavia, a country racked by more than its share of recent troubles. He's an alarmingly good author, master of understated surrealism, a fabulist of the first water, with a sensibility akin to that of Borges, Buñuel, or Bergman. Having produced seven books to date, he now has four paperbacks available in English, from the firm Publishing Atelier Polaris (Bulevar Mihajla Pupina 10E/162, 11070 Belgrade, Yugoslavia). Two short-story collections—*Impossible Encounters* ($7.50, 131 pages, ISBN unavailable) and *Seven Touches of Music* ($7.50, 162 pages, ISBN unavailable)—contain tales of incredible visitations that alter the lives of average people, as well as afterlife fantasies and time-travel paradoxes. The stories in the latter collection are thematically linked in a subtle fashion by the wonders of song. Two novels—*Time-Gifts* ($7.50, 145 pages, ISBN unavailable) and *The Writer* ($4.50, 81 pages, ISBN unavailable)—continue Zivkovic's piercing examination of the ways in which average lives can be deranged by moments of absurdist grace. I for one am looking forward to the publication of his next book, *The Library*, from Ministry of Whimsy Press.

This time around, Golden Gryphon Press <*www.goldengryphon.com*> regales us with two fine collections in their ongoing attempt to single-handedly span the entire

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range of living SF meistersingers. From George Zebrowski comes *Swift Thoughts* (hardcover, $24.95, 311 pages, ISBN 1-930846-08-8), graced by a beauteous Bob Eggleton cover and representing three decades of Zebrowski's alternately cool and fevered lucubrations. The range here is impressive, from the slapstick alien invasion of Curly Howard-lookalikes in "Stooges" to the philosophical intricacies of the title story and others such as "Gödel's Doom." Echoing and even prefiguring such peers as Charles Harness, Poul Anderson, and Greg Egan, Zebrowski proves he is intimately engaged with both the social currents of our era and the timeless verities of the cosmos. Like Feynman playing bongo drums, Zebrowski is a blend of wild heart and cool brains.

Having read my preceding review of Jeffrey Ford's new novel, you might imagine you have a good grasp of what Ford's writing is all about. Far from it! Until and unless you dip into Ford's first collection, *The Fantasy Writer's Assistant* (hardcover, $23.95, 247 pages, ISBN 1-930846-10-X), you won't know the dazzling array of techniques, conceits, tones, and shadings that Ford possesses in his bag of tricks. Featuring three previously unpublished stories, this assemblage darts from metafictional romps such as "Bright Morning" to autobiographical conundrums like "The Honeyed Knot"; from knockabout noir ("Floating in Lindrethool") to satirical jabs at celebrity culture ("Exo-Skeleton Town"). It's hard for me to pick a favorite from among such distinguished tales, but I'd opt for either "Creation," in which a young boy breathes life into a heap of sticks, then has to live with the results; or "On the Road to New Egypt," where a hapless driver picks up a hitch-hiking Jesus and the Devil. But whichever flavor of Ford you favor, you won't be disappointed at this tasty banquet. O

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SF Conventional Calendar

Now's the time to make your plans for the rest of the winter's activities. Plan now for social weekends with your favorite SF authors, editors, artists, and fellow fans. For an explanation of con(vention)s, a sample of SF folksongs, info on fanzines and clubs, and how to get a later, longer list of cons, send me an SASE (self-addressed, stamped #10 [business] envelope) at 10 Hill #22-L, Newark NJ 07102. The hot line is (973) 242-5999. If a machine answers (with a list of the week's cons), leave a message and I'll call back on my nickel. When writing cons, send an SASE. For free listings, tell me of your con 6 months out. Look for me at cons behind the Filthy Pierre badge, playing a musical keyboard.—Erwin S. Strauss

JANUARY 2003

4–5—**Trek Celebration.** For info, write: **4623 Aminda, Shawnee KS 66226.** Or phone: **(913) 441-9405** (10 AM to 10 PM, not collect). **Web: www.sfedora.com. E-mail: sfedora1@aol.com.** Con will be held in: E. Rutherford NJ (near NYC) (if city omitted, same as in address) at the Sheraton. Guests will include: none announced at press. Commercial Trek event.

10–12—**RustyCon, Box 84291, Seattle WA 98124. www.rustycon.org.** Doubletree, Bellevue WA. D. Duncan, L. Bagby.

10–12—**GAFilk, 890F Atlanta #150, Roswell GA 30075. www.gafilk.org.** Near Atlanta GA. SF/fantasy folksinging.

10–12—**OhayonCon, Box 3245, Akron OH 44309. www.ohayocon.com.** Hilton, Columbus OH. Calvello, T. Grant. Anime.

17–19—**Arisia, Bldg. 600, 1 Kendall Sq. #322, Cambridge MA 02139. www.arisia.org.** Boston MA. Turtledove, Lewis.

17–19—**ChattaCon, Box 23908, Chattanooga TN 37422. www.chattacon.org.** Read House. Greg Benford, C. L. Grant.

23–27—**FURther ConFusion, 105 Serra Way #236, Milpitas CA 95035. San Jose CA.** Furries; no connection to below.

24–26—**ConFusion, Box 8284, Ann Arbor MI 48107. www.stilyagi.org.** Detroit MI. General SF/fantasy convention.

24–26—**MarsCon, c/o Box 8143, Yorktown VA 23693. www.marscon.net.** Clarion, Williamsburg VA. Relaxacon.

24-26—**VeriCon, H-R SF Assn., c/o 4 Univ. Hall, Harvard U., Cambridge MA 02138. www.vericon.org.** T. Moore.

31–Feb. 3—**UshiCon, Box 40937, Austin TX 78704. www.ushicon.com. info@ushicon.com.** Capital Marriott. Anime.

FEBRUARY 2003

7–9—**CapriCon, Box 60085, Chicago IL 60660. www.capricon.org.** Sheraton, Arlington Heights (Chicago) IL.

7–9—**UK Filk, 155 Long Meadow, Aylesbury HP21 7EB, UK. (01296) 331-055.** Holiday Inn, Ipswich UK. Music.

14–16—**Boskone, Box 809, Framingham MA 01701. (617) 625-2311. www.nesfa.org.** Sheraton, Boston MA. D. Brin.

14–16—**RadCon, 2527 W. Kennewick Ave. #162, Kennewick WA 99336. radcon.yi.org.** Doubletree, Pasco WA. Thomas.

14–16—**FarPoint, 6099 Hunt Club Rd., Elkridge MD 21075. www.bcpi.net/~wilsonr.** Marriott, Hunt Valley MD. Trek.

14–16—**KatsuCon, Box 222691, Chantilly VA 22153. (703) 795-2219.** Hyatt, Crystal City VA (near DC). Anime.

14–17—**Gallifrey, Box 3021, N. Hollywood CA 91609. www.gallifreyone.com.** Airtel, Van Nuys CA. C. Baker. Dr. Who.

21–23—**SheVaCon, Box 416, Verona VA 24482. www.shevacon.org.** Holiday Inn Tanglewood, Roanoke VA. H. Clement.

21–23—**Potlatch, c/o 6405 Regent, Oakland CA 94618. www.potlatch-sf.org.** Ramada, San Francisco CA. Literary SF.

21–23—**Con DFW, 2183 Buckingham Rd. #282, Richardson TX 75081. www.condfw.org.** Radisson. D. Cherry, Elrod.

21–23—**Redemption, McIntee, 26 Kings Meadow View, Wetherby LS22 7FX, UK.** Ashford UK. Babylon 5/Blake's 7.

28–Mar. 2—**ConDor, Box 15771, San Diego CA 92175. www.condorcon.org.** Doubletree, Del Mar CA. R. Crais.

28–Mar. 2—**Left Coast Crime, 234 E. Colorado Blvd. #850, Pasadena CA 91101. www.lcc2003@aol.com.** Mysteries.

AUGUST 2003

28–Sep. 1—**TorCon 3, Box 3, Stn. A, Toronto ON M5W 1A2. www.torcon3.on.ca.** WorldCon. C$250/US$170.

SEPTEMBER 2004

2–6—**Noreascon 4, Box 1010, Framingham MA 01701. www.noreascon.org. Boston MA.** William Tenn. WorldCon. $140.

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4–8—**Interaction, Box 58009, Louisville KY 40268. www.interaction.worldcon.org.uk.** Glasgow UK, WorldCon. $115.

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MARCH LEAD STORY

Popular new writer **Alex Irvine** makes a pyrotechnic *Asimov's* debut in these pages next issue with our lead story for March, taking us to the outer reaches of the solar system and deep within the unbelievably hostile environment of the enigmatic gas giant Neptune, as a daring human adventurer pushes the envelope and his luck, and finds that he may have pushed both of them a little *too* far, as a life-or-death race against the clock plays out in an alien and frightening arena where everything is "Shepherded by Galatea" This one is hard-edged, fast-paced, suspenseful science fiction adventure at its best. Don't miss it!

OTHER TOP-FLIGHT WRITERS

Hugo, Nebula, and World Fantasy Award-winner **Lucius Shepard**, one of the modern masters of the form, returns with a poignant yet disquieting look at things that are "Only Partly Here"—one that may haunt you for some time to come; Hugo and Nebula-winner **Charles Sheffield** takes us on a harrowing—and surprising—tour of "The Waste Land"; popular and prolific British "hard science" writer **Stephen Baxter** voyages to a bizarre far-future and deals himself a crucial hand in "The Great Game"; Hugo and Nebula Award-winner **Joe Haldeman** whisks us into another strange future, and deep into space, for a sly and suspenseful look at the ominous fate that may be hanging over "Giza"; and new writer **Sally Gwylan**, making a compelling *Asimov's* debut, takes us into the recent *past* instead, into a bitter, freezing, snow-blasted winter night in the heart of the Great Depression, for the powerful story of what happens to a group of people with nothing left to lose and nowhere else to go who take shelter "In the Icehouse."

EXCITING FEATURES

Robert Silverberg's "Reflections" column delves into some "Fantastic Libraries"; **Norman Spinrad's** "On Books" column takes a stern look at "Economic Determinism" and **James Patrick Kelly's** "On the Net" column scours the internet for a few good "Laughs"; plus an array of cartoons, poems, and other features. Look for our March issue on sale at your newsstand on January 21, 2003, or subscribe today (you can also subscribe online, or order *Asimov's* in downloadable electronic formats, at our website, *www.asimovs.com*) and be sure to miss none of the great stuff we have coming up for you this year!

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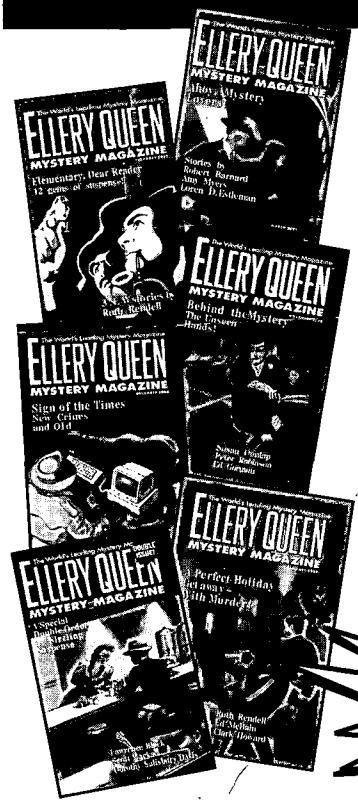

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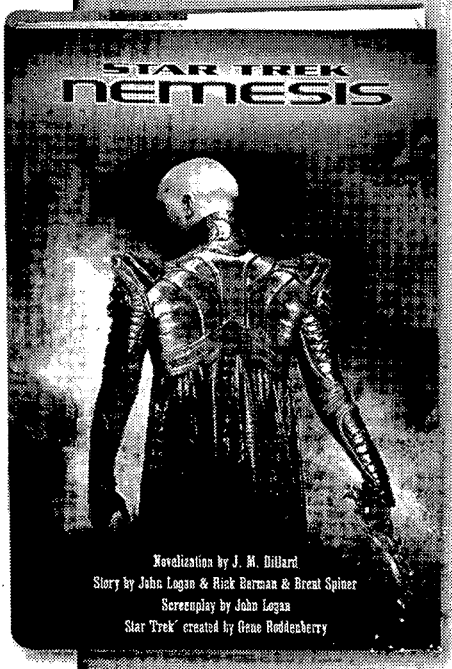
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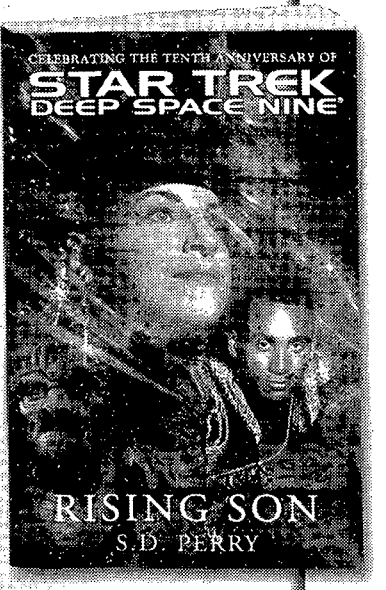

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